

## POLAND and HUNGARY CAPITAL'S WAY OUT

Plans of the bourgeoisie in the East grow ever more frantic as their economies totter on the brink of collapse and their strategies fail to deliver the salvation they so desperately want and need.

From the Elbe to the Urals the crisis of capitalism in the east is now obviously terminal. In Bulletin 12 we wrote on the nature of the crisis of capitalism in the Russian Empire and what the bourgeoisie were planning as an escape: Perestroika; Glasnost; the turn to the market; increasing exploitation of the working class; unemployment etc. etc. Now is a good moment to see how the situation is developing. Now is a good moment to look at the strategy of the bourgeoisie and their problems, to see how successful they have been and what lies ahead for them. In particular it is a good moment to look at how the policies of the Eastern bourgeoisie are actually being put into effect. At the forefront at the Russian Empire's attempts lie the satellite states of Eastern Europe, the empire where the effects of the crisis of the decay of the system has been most sharply felt - and where Gorbachev's 'solution' is being tested on the working classes of such as Hungary and Poland. For Poland and Hungary are the states which most clearly exemplify the direction that Gorbachev seeks to take. And what comes across most clearly from an examination what the bourgeoisie are doing in both countries is the unity of the bourgeoisie.

### HUNGARY

In Hungary the economic situation is desperate, the economy is in ruins. The rate of inflation is 'officially' 16%, in reality much more, a nation of ten million have a debt of nearly £8 billion and rising; the cost of basic foodstuffs rose earlier this year by 17% with meat and dairy products rising by 44%. Medicines are now 80% dearer than they were last year with some brands showing a 350% increase. For those who can afford them the price of cars has risen by 25% and for those who cannot the cost of public transport rose in March by between 60% and 80%. Postal charges also rose then by 50%. Such price rises are a direct consequence of the state's efforts to cut the budget deficit and increase the level of exploitation of the Hungarian working class. A recent government survey indicated that the Hungarian worker had to work for 70 hours or more per week to maintain his standard of living. In 1988 when inflation rose by 18% according to the state wages only rose by 5%. Taking the recent rises in costs outlined above the prospects for the proletariat look pretty gloomy this year.

It is thus too late for the bourgeoisie in Hungary, as elsewhere to pretend that this isn't the case or to try to use repressive measures alone to control the anticipated upsurge in working class discontent at the measures being taken to try to redress the situation. What they are doing is just what they are doing in Russia, trying to mobilise the working class behind economic changes which move towards the market, attract foreign investment to be paid for by an increasing exploitation of the workers and, most of all, blaming the past for the mess they are in.

In a recent report of the events of 1956 which, as part of the rewriting of history to suit the present, the Hungarian state has been using to show how different they are from the Stalinist hacks which drowned the uprising in 1956 in a sea of workers' blood, appeared the explanation for the terminal situation the Hungarian economy is in. The report stated:

"The crisis which has been unfolding for the past fifteen years is a manifestation of the crisis of the whole East European model of socialism."

In February the Communist party officially admitted that the post-war experiment with one party rule had been a failure and set up a committee to prepare for gradual transition to a multi-party system. As the Party General secretary put it:

"We have reached the conclusion on the basis of two weighty experiences - the economic and social tensions prior to 1956 and those in recent years - that we cannot continue along this road. ... I see in the multi-party system greater possibilities for ensuring that we commit fewer such mistakes"

Only last May the party had committed itself to "pluralism" within the one party system but clearly this had not had the desired effect of rallying Hungarians behind them. And so 'the whole hog' had to be gone. In other words a commitment only to 'glasnost' had not been sufficient to rally other fractions of the bourgeoisie behind the policies of increasing exploitation of the workers, nor had it been enough to divert class action into support for 'democratisation'. The full flavour of the democratic myth was called for and the Hungarian bourgeoisie, confident that, whatever happens, the rule of capital will not be threatened, are now launched into a carnival of deception, laying claim to be heirs of the revolution of 1956, European social democracy and workers control. While warning however that membership of the socialist camp and the Warsaw Pact could not be put into question and keeping tight control of both the army, and more importantly, the secret police, the Hungarian Workers Party (sic) have fought with each other to propose more radical slogans and proposals. Politburo member Janos Berecz agrees that "liberal parliamentary democracy on the western model is what is being sought, here Pozsgay, leader of the 'reformers' within the Politburo says that:

"socialism has come to the end of its days and is an obstacle to progress in all fields ... We took the wrong way, we lost so much time that we could never catch up and now we are not an independent country - we can make only ten-years-out-of-date hair-driers."

One party rule has been named as the culprit for the ills of Hungarian capitalism and must go, and in going the delusion that capitalism run by a multi party bourgeoisie will somehow be any different, and less exploitative, will hopefully succeed in making the proletariat accept austerity in exchange for political 'freedom'.

Already the parliamentary contenders are assembling. The 'Hungarian Democratic Forum' a loose coalition of reforming CP members, Christian socialists and Christian Democrats on the west German model is in existence proposing solution which stress "Hungarian National values" in language that resembles Pamyat in Russia. The Smallholders Party which took 57% of the vote in the last elections in 1945 has been resurrected by some of its surviving members, and the virulently anti-communist Alliance of Free Democrats has set up its stall. Everyone awaits the reformation of the Social Democratic Party to complete the team. For that is what they are. Whatever their political complexion and whatever the extent of the "freedoms" that are allowed by the bourgeoisie all these bourgeois expressions are united, absolutely unanimous on one point, the need to save the capitalist economy, to get credit from the west and to make the proletariat pay for the crisis by working their way out of it. They are all committed to increasing austerity sugared by 'democratic freedoms' for the working class.

In recent months a number of Independent "unions" have been formed by groups of workers, predominantly white collar workers throughout Hungary. In February an attempt was made by a group of fifty workers to set up a "Hungarian Solidarity". This latter group accused the government of "squandering their labour" and called for wage reform, workers self-government, shares in state industries and workers councils as in 1956. Clearly the working class are beginning to respond not only to the blandishments of the bourgeoisie but to the growing crisis in their wage packets. The fact that such organisations are forming is itself a demonstration that the working class are beginning to take a hand in the game but the form such action is taking, if it does not break through the bounds of the "union to save capitalism" approach will merely strengthen the exploitation of the capitalists and demoralise the class combativity of the proletariat.

#### POLAND

If we look at Poland, where the solution of the bourgeoisie is likewise pretty far advanced, at least in terms of presentation we can see the potential pitfalls that face the Hungarian, and other proletariats of Eastern Europe.

Since the Seventies Poland has seen the sharpest expression of class conflict in Eastern Europe, a conflict which has been told of many times in the press of the proletarian movement. Upon the backs of the class action of the working class the Solidarnosc parasite has climbed until today it stands hand in hand with the Communist state at the apex of the capitalist heap. For here too the economic crisis is so desperate that desperate measures have been called for. The unification of the bourgeoisie has been deemed essential if the proletariat are to be successfully pauperised to save the Polish economy. Interests rates earlier this year in zlotys rose to 66% which pushed the dollar exchange rate through the floor, plunging 12% in a single day legally but on the black market pushing the value of the dollar up to 3500 zloty. So what is so important about the dollar. Well, so

desperate is the crisis and the shortage of goods that they sell only at the black market dollar rate in zloty or for dollars themselves. A flat, a car, chickens, cans of beer, or a meal at a restaurant can only be paid for by dollars or zloty at black market rate and there are many items such as baby food, wood for building houses or Polish Vodka that cannot be bought for any amount of zloty: only dollars will do. Only cabbage, it is said in Poland, can still be bought at the official rate for zloty.

In such a situation negotiations have been going on for months regarding the legislation of Solidarnosc and the introduction of "democracy" into the running of the country to solve the economic problems of the state. Lech Walensa has called for a "reconstruction of the state which will make this one-party state into a state that belongs to the nation and society." And the prospect of impending economic collapse and the "fresh breeze" from Moscow have brought an extraordinary softening of the position of Jaruzelski's government. Thus in Poland too the different elements of the bourgeoisie, from the Party to the Catholic church are united in seeking to save Polish Capitalism from the economic disaster which threatens to engulf it. As Jacek Kuron, an 'intellectual' associated with Solidarnosc put it during a Radio Free Europe broadcast recently:

"It is necessary to force the regime to accept radical political and economic reforms. It is not the same thing if this is done through strikes or through a discussion in society as a whole, with participation, involvement in public groups, social movements and therefore a debate through representatives in various negotiations between social groups and above all between the society and the regime. Everything that has happened recently gives hope that this second way will be possible."

As Stanislaw Handzlik, leader of Solidarnosc at the Nowa Huta steelworks in 1980 and member of the unions national leadership put it last year when asked about the possibility of an anti-crisis pact:

"The idea seems reasonable to me because the main question in Poland today is not who will win, but whether we can get out of the crisis as a nation. And if both sides prove willing such a national understanding is the only way. Solidarnosc is not putting forward too radical a programme. On the other hand the regime - while wanting as much as possible to maintain its possessions - has also to show a readiness for concessions. ... The Hungarian experience, and above all the Yugoslavian one show that self-management is incapable of curing the economy here. It is an outdated remedy. On the other hand the experience of our western neighbours shows that the market system, the capitalist system, is the most stable and efficient. So why seek a special road, why involve ourselves in experiments, when we have a ready-made model that works marvellously and achieves a perfect balance."

(our emphasis)

And there we have it in a nutshell. Solidarnosc and the State, united on the need to move to the market economy, attract western capital and delude the proletariat into believing that this is the only way that works, a way that has brought austerity and pauperisation to increasing numbers of workers and others throughout the western world since capitalism faced its historic crisis once again in the late Sixties. Two months ago the deal was signed. Elections are expected as early as June according to the accord worked out between Walensa and Interior Minister Kiszczak. Yes, the unity of the bourgeoisie against the proletariat, just as in Hungary, is assured. But in Poland we have a working class, for all the delusions of the church and Solidarnosc, which is well versed in the traps of capital, with a vast experience of defensive actions against the imposed austerity of the capitalist state. The combined bourgeoisie still have to convince the proletariat that they must suffer for the nation. And there are ominous signs, ominous for the bourgeoisie at any rate, that they still have a long way to go before they can persuade the proletariat to suffer greater misery to save their decaying system. The Peasant Party MP put it succinctly during the negotiations when he said:

"As yet most Poles are unimpressed by the political changes; the economic debacle is paramount."

#### POLISH WORKERS FIGHT BACK

Even while the negotiations were going on the Polish working class were defending their living standards and making it clear that they were, as yet, unprepared to let them fall any further, whatever was agreed. In February in the middle of the negotiations 7000 miners staged a sit-in strike near the town of Belchatow. This was only one of a series of disputes that occurred throughout the winter. This particular strike was only called off after the personal intervention of Walensa who said the negotiations were threatened by it. After it was called off one miner said:

"We call off our strike for political reasons and if it weren't for the round table we would have kept going on. ... we support the round table, we want Solidarnosc to be legalised: there will be someone to defend us then, life will be better."

The miners, whose pay at the start of the strike was 74000 zloty per month on average (£12) began the strike calling for a 30000 zloty increase. As the strike went on the demands escalated and widened. After Walensa's intervention they accepted a temporary bonus, a promise to recommence negotiations later and there was an agreement to return to work. The efforts of Solidarnosc and Walensa were clearly therefore to stop class action jeopardising the negotiations reinforcing their belief that the saving of Polish capitalism is far more important than miners living on the breadline. As Edward Olaszewski of the Belchatow Strike Committee put it after the strike had been called off:

"There was a moment of psychological breakthrough, when we realised that we had to act responsibly as a group and with an understanding of the national situation."

In other words, an understanding of the situation of capital replaced the workers understanding of the situation they were in themselves. The role of Solidarnosc is thus put into sharp relief. To tell the workers that if they do not strike "life will be better", while negotiating with Jaruzelski about how to screw the working class in order to defend the capitalist economy.



Has He Conned Them Again?

This, of course wasnt the only strike this Spring in Poland. There has been a rash of wildcat strikes, and even some led and organised, under pressure from the working class, by the "legal" unions in opposition to the calm preached by Solidarity. Handzlik reported in an interview that in the Lenin Steel Plant over the winter Solidarnosc had had a very hard time convincing workers not to go on strike time after time as their economic situation deteriorated in line with the collapse of the economy. He clearly pointed out the danger for the state and for himself and his Solidarnosc colleagues, now in part responsible for guiding Polish Capitalism through the storms of economic collapse. He pointed to the fact that the workers have regained their confidence in collective action despite Solidarnosc's appeals for calm:

"The workers ..(will).. demand their due, especially since the country's economic situation is getting worse daily. Inflation is incredible, and people no longer have any savings, because only nuts would save zlotys ... people are living from day to day; families have no hope of saving to buy furniture, washing machines, TVs. We are living as though in the African bush. What we get we eat every day, and the next day the question arises of what to do. This is shaping social consciousness and creating an explosive situation. Neither a new state of war, nor the army, nor the police can keep such a situation under control."

Only Solidarnosc, he thought, had a chance of channelling the discontent of the workers away from

class action into cooperation with the state for the salvation of Polish capitalism. In May 200,000 copper miners staged a strike and sit-in. Walensa appealed personally to them to call off the strike and they quickly sent him packing. The government then caved in and the miners got their demanded 30% pay rise and then and only then did the strike end.

Poland and Hungary therefore are acting as frontrunners for Gorbachov in his race against history. Every lesson he learns there about how to organise the state and control the class actions of the proletariat will be used when his "reforms" cause similar situations to emerge in Russia.

#### STILL NOT CONVINCED

It would be untrue, however, to claim that there is unanimity among the bourgeoisie in the East regarding the validity of his approach. In Russia there are still important sectors of the state at best uncertain, at worst openly hostile to Gorbachov's solutions. Thus far Gorbachov and his backers, in particular the KGB, have successfully kept these at bay by a mixture of preferment - those who keep quiet are left alone - and threats. Those who grumble too much are forcibly retired like Gromyko or are suddenly find themselves accused of corruption and bribery, as Ligachev found himself recently on national television.

In the empire too there are whole states who, as yet, have not gone down the Polish and Hungarian road. East Germany, cosseted by its neighbour to the West in Bonn still believes its economic situation does not necessitate the move towards the market and "democracy". The East German state still believes that its economic pull and its relationship with the West will be sufficient to pull it through (If not it can always threaten to demolish the wall and let thousands more 'refugees' flood west disrupting the West German economic miracle.)

To the south the Czech bourgeoisie, though its economy is in a far more parlous state, similarly is too frightened to make any move in the "glasnost" direction. This is primarily due to the fact that those in power at present got where they were by being the toadies of Brezhnev after the events of 1968. If you like they are the last dinosaurs of that era and they are holding tightly onto the reins of power come what may. Demonstrations against them are being dealt with by means of maximum force and beatings up and imprisonment multiply daily. The attacks on parades on May 1st were merely the latest examples of the brittleness of the ruling elite. More and more it is clear that even if they were to accept Gorbachov's policies they would be unable to carry them out, unable to make anyone believe that they believed in them. But there isn't really anyone else who can. The Czech equivalent of the Russian and Hungarian 'reform' wing were wiped out after 1968. The bourgeoisie faces real problems here. Similarly in Rumania the economy is past even the stage of saving as Ceausescu razes even more villages in order to clear ground for his enormous concentration camps and yet more palaces he and his wife can live in. Here however there is clearly a wing supporting Gorbachov and it cannot be long before reality impinges and they take over the direction of a state with little hope for the future at all.

#### DISUNITY

Poland and Hungary remain the models to follow. But there is one quirk. There the working class is, as everywhere, the major problem to be overcome. It is also the only one, there is no real dissension among the bourgeoisie. This is primarily because there are only Poles in Poland and only Hungarians in Hungary. Russia is not so 'lucky'. For the other major problem of letting loose the strings of power is what happens if there is not unity among the bourgeoisie. Already Gorbachov has his problems in Latvia, Armenia, Lithuania, and most recently in Georgia. He is acutely aware of the situation of state collapse in Yugoslavia where the bourgeoisie of differing nationalities are trying to mobilise the workers away from the class demands prompted by the collapse of the economy onto nationalistic demands fronted by them against similar demands of other competing nationalities within the same state. The working class is not the only problem though it remains the only solution. (we shall return to the problems of bourgeois nationalism for the proletariat in Eastern Europe in another article.)

#### THE PROLETARIAN ANSWER

If the proletariat in Hungary, Poland and Russia get conned by the ploys of 'democratic freedoms', 'liberal democracy' peddled by their national bourgeoisies, by the 'life will be better' garbage of bourgeois parasites like Walensa and Solidarnosc, then they will be beaten, mobilised for austerity, mobilised for pauperisation, behind these factions of the bourgeoisie, mobilised by the capitalist answer to the economic crisis that threatens the rule of capital **all over the world**, an answer that will lead to increased misery and war.

Another solution, however, beckons, the proletarian solution. Workers must reject the bourgeoisie in all its guises, socialist fatherland, liberal democracy, trade unions, for they all defend capitalism and just as they did in the past will drown the working class in blood as part of that solution. Workers in the East, just as in the West must realise that there is but one world crisis that threatens us all and which only **we** can solve. And we can only solve it by destroying the capitalist monster itself and imposing our solution, the rule of the working class instead of the rule of the bourgeoisie, an end to the lunacy of a world which has the capacity to feed itself four times over but where millions starve because our masters cannot make a profit; a world where we have the capacity to produce every item anyone could possibly want but where millions starve in idleness because our masters decree that nothing will be produced unless they can make a profit from it; a world where the weapons of destruction are the only growth industry in an economic system in deepest decay and which must be destroyed before it murders life on the planet.

# Ingram

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## Correspondence

ATTACK INTERNATIONAL - BM 6577, London, WC1N 3XX

18th December 1988

Dear Comrades,

thanks a lot for your recent letter and especially the back copies of the 'Bulletin'. Your comments on the Irish struggle were noted with interest by us, but we feel that it is on such a point that the divisions between us become clear. If we could quote from the first draft of our pamphlet on the Irish struggle:

"Some revolutionaries argue that 'all forms of nationalism, national liberation, national self-determination are deadly weapons of the bourgeoisie aimed directly at the struggles of the working class' (Communist Bulletin Group). There is a lot of truth in this statement as nationalistic struggles ignore the crucial fact that the national bourgeoisie are as much an enemy to the working class as the imperial bourgeoisie. The 26 Counties state and the vicious attacks upon the working class there are an excellent example of the pit-falls of 'national self-determination'.

There would not be all that much difference with a 'united' and 'independent' Ireland than there is at the moment. The working class would still be exploited by capital. It is vital that this is never forgotten, pushed into the background by blind glorification of republicanism, the IRA and Sinn Fein. But it is equally vital that we are not blinded by theoretical masterpieces and dogmatic absolutism either.

There is a massive level of struggle in the 6 Counties that has enormous potential - that is why the British state is willing to invest so much into a totally unprofitable concern. There are many problems with the republican struggle, but it is only through struggle that ideas change. To cut ourselves off from this struggle because of our intellectual ivory towers would be a major mistake. We have got to work with what we have got in reality, not with what we would like to have. And that means supporting the struggles of the republican working class while criticising its reactionary elements such as nationalism and religious dominance. Indeed, Ireland can be seen as the dividing line between the abstract theoreticians and the practical class strugglers".

We believe that if Sinn Fein did ever achieve power, then it would perform the role of a bourgeois government, supporting capital against the working class. But the point is that the potential of struggle could mean that bourgeois elements such as SF are pushed aside by the working class. To hold back from such a struggle is an abdication of responsibility we feel.

This is our main basis - we believe in populist politics. We argue that if our propaganda is not accessible to the broad mass of the working class, then it is pretty well useless. This you will see from some of our productions (see enclosed). Such groups as the ICC and yourselves do have excellent political positions that we really find very little to disagree with - **except from your practical position as regards struggle, everyday life and general accessibility of propaganda.** Certainly, the propaganda that you have produced is more accessible than that of the ICC, but we feel that it is still locked in the ghetto of high theorism. A further point is that we find it very difficult to be interested by the extremely detailed denunciations of other groups in the left communist milieu. Obviously, political positions do need to be criticised if that is necessary - to deny that would be to accept totalitarianism. But when such theoretical elaborations achieve more importance than basic political propaganda, then surely something is wrong somewhere?

We would be very interested to read your response to what we have raised above. We certainly feel that there is no 'fixed line' that we rigidly adhere to, so any points that you make would be eagerly read. One final point - sometimes (when we're pissed!) we say that our basic aim is to 'popularise communism'. Some of the high theorists would argue that that is a contradictory statement - we would argue that they're irrelevant to the working class and its struggles.

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## RESPONSE

Box CBG

Comrades,

Thank you for your letter. It makes points that have been raised again and again in the communist milieu since its reappearance twenty years ago. We welcome the opportunity to restate our position.

We'll attempt to deal with your points as they appear in your letter. First though, on a point of information, we are puzzled by your phrase "the national bourgeoisie are as much an enemy to the working class as the imperial bourgeoisie"; this would seem to indicate that you believe there are two types of bourgeoisie today. Perhaps you would explain the material basis for this difference and what the ramifications are for the working class.

We see no such distinction - as our Platform makes clear we see state capitalism as

universal, and it's dynamics are similarly universal. All capitalist states are imperialist - though the expression of these imperialist interests are largely (though not totally) subsumed under the imperialist interests of the US and USSR. The fact that, say, the Irish State, given its material weakness, has no scope for expressing these interests, should not lead us to the conclusion that it is a somehow different animal to, say the UK state (which of course has next to no such scope outwith the interests of the US.) We believe that to argue otherwise must eventually lead to the conclusion that one bourgeois state can be more progressive (or less reactionary) than another. One of the greatest gains of the communist movement of the first quarter of this century was the understanding that this idea in the period of capitalist decadence was false.

We would further ask you to identify whether or not you see the UK's role in Northern Ireland as an imperialist one - your letter doesn't make this clear. As we've made clear before, we see it as no more imperialist than the UK state's role in Scotland, Wales or Yorkshire. If you disagree we would appreciate it if you could make clear the difference.

Now to the points that you raise. You talk of how vital it is for the working class to realise that in Ireland it would "still be exploited by capital" even if Ireland was "united" and "independent" but then write "it is equally vital that we are not blinded by theoretical masterpieces and dogmatic absolutism either." What does this mean? Sneering cannot take the place of polemic. You appear to argue that the clarity of view given by these positions is vital but that this clarity of view mustn't blind us...????

Judging by your letter your position appears to be that the Republican struggle is reactionary but that "political class strugglers" like yourselves recognise that the struggle can transform the working class regardless of its direction. Comrades, this is extremely dangerous ground.

The working class this century can **only** struggle on its own terrain, or be defeated. This understanding, the legacy of the Dutch, German and Italian Left, fought for and defended by the Communist milieu today, cannot be sneered away as "theoretical masterpieces" - it was paid for, and is still being paid for, by the blood of millions of workers.

"There is a massive level of struggle in the six counties that has enormous potential - that is why the British state is willing to invest so much into a totally unprofitable venture" - you write. But where is this massive level of struggle? The class struggle in Ulster, as in the rest of the UK, is relatively quiet. What expressions there are, are being corralled by the left and the Republicans into rent, housing and civil rights issues - all safely on bourgeois terrain. Are you talking about a massive level of Republican struggle? Again, where is your evidence? We would expect such a massive bourgeois campaign in reaction to a working class struggle. Neither at the moment seems apparent. Perhaps you could enlighten us on this. As for your claim that the UK state is investing "so much into a totally unprofitable concern" - it is difficult to see this massive investment - try showing the workers at Harland and Wolff. Ulster is neither a profitable nor an unprofitable concern. It is part of the UK state's hinterland - like, we repeat, Scotland, which, by the way, receives a far greater part of state spending that its population figures would suggest - why is this comrades? 'Massive struggle' in Scotland?

You further write "it is only through struggle that ideas change. To cut ourselves off from this struggle because of our intellectual ivory towers would be a major mistake." You equate political clarity with ivory towers. Your notion that 'struggle' in itself can be positive, educative, liberating is, as we've said, not a new one. It is, unfortunately, a reactionary one. Sometimes its proponents are anti-fascist, or anti-apartheid, or anti-zionist or...but the idea is always the same: this or that struggle must be supported and Communists are abstentionists for ignoring these struggles. But we don't ignore them - we attack them as an attack on workers, as an attempt to derail class struggle, to attack the unity of workers as a class and impose bourgeois divisions. Your talk of the "Republican working class" indicates your lack of clarity on this - there is no republican working class any more than there is a protestant, black, white, gay or female working class - unless we accept only bourgeois sociological definitions of what class is.

Your idea that "the potential of struggle could mean that Bourgeois elements are pushed aside" follows directly from your idealist notions of struggle, which ignore the **class**

nature of all struggle - either as an expression of the working class ~~or~~ of the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois struggle, such as the Republican movement, is the antithesis of working class struggle - it exists to isolate, to reinforce political, religious and geographic divisions; to drain militant workers of confidence in their own abilities, to tie the workers to Bourgeois notions of democracy and civil rights, to mask the true nature of exploitation and oppression. To argue still that such 'struggle' can lead to heightened political consciousness is on par with arguing that since WW1 led to the Russian Revolution we should support imperialist war.

How far do you carry the logic of your position? Do you argue that we should be in the Unions fighting since that's where the workers are? After all "we have got to work with what we have got in reality" - and we don't have to look too closely at **whose** reality do we?

You "believe in populist politics". We don't - we believe only in the politics of the working class. You claim that "if our propaganda is not accessible to the broad mass of the working class, then it is pretty well useless." We disagree completely. The lessons of this century are that communist politics are inaccessible to the broad mass of workers except at moments of high class struggle. For us this doesn't make our politics or our existence 'useless' - but **crucial**. It is the crucial role of the class' political vanguard to defend and maintain the gains made in past struggle so that they are not lost for future struggles. This is not academicism or a retreat to ivory towers; it is a fundamental part of the class' existence as a class - that it throws up a politically conscious minority who will act upon the majority in times of high class struggle. This is not a pedagogic relationship, as you seem to believe. You make a fundamental mistake if you believe the reason that communist politics are inaccessible has anything greatly to do with presentation. We suggest you try to find out about the **mass circulation** press of the Russian revolution - you'll find no echo of your contempt for theory there.

Again for twenty years we have heard voices raised to the effect that the reason we are not heard by workers must be - if we are saying the right things - we are saying the right things the wrong way: using too much jargon, too many big words, too many idea etc. etc. And so we have your notion of us as "locked in the ghetto of high theorism": the insults change - but the level of understanding stays the same.

It is a sad fact that those in the past who have advocated what you now do - entering bourgeois struggles "since that's where the workers are" or changing our positions/propaganda since workers don't understand it have either been sucked completely into leftism or have sunk into demoralisation.

What can we say? Bourgeois street politics carry a certain excitement, a certain dynamism - deliberately so to suck in working class militants. The defence of communist positions, especially in today's period of low class struggle, offers no such excitement, no such enervating activism. But activity **always** serves a purpose: there are no neutrals in the class war. We hope you realise this before you disappear leftwards up the backside of the bourgeoisie.

fraternally,  
G.M. for the CBG.

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**ADDRESS**

Box CBG  
boomtown books  
167 King Street  
Aberdeen  
U.K.



# The Proletarian Milieu and REGROUPMENT

The last issue of the Bulletin contained an article by us attempting to draw up a balance-sheet of the work of the revolutionary milieu since its virtual rebirth in the events and aftermath of 1968. For all but the wilfully blind (or perhaps, more accurately, the desperately blind) the need to understand the contrast between the revolutionary movement's initial achievements, hopes and assumptions and its current fragmented and demoralised situation is an unavoidable task if we are to face the future with any degree of clarity and confidence. The whiff of panic permeating the ranks of revolutionaries is unmistakable. It takes several apparently contradictory forms - blind activism, retreat into academic theorisation, outright demoralisation and programmatic degeneration - but its roots are identical: a failure to understand the difference between the current period and the last revolutionary epoch and a consequent failure to draw the correct lessons for the work and role of revolutionary organisation.

The crisis in the milieu did not appear overnight. In fact, it is true to say that all the weaknesses we see currently in flower were present from the beginning. But for the greater part of the seventies they were largely hidden by the profound (though fragile) achievements - the recapitulation of programmatic clarity, the organisational strengthening through the foundation of the ICC and the International Conferences called by **Battaglia Comunista**. However, by the Eighties - the ICC's ironically named Years of Truth - the demands of translating theoretical clarity into a fighting intervention in the massive outburst of struggle in the French and British steel strikes left the initial weaknesses cruelly exposed. To a greater or lesser extent, the whole milieu was affected but the most spectacular casualty was the ICC. Its inability to deal with the extra-ordinary ferment of internal debate on a wide variety of issues eventually culminated in a crippling series of splits in 1981. The CBG was a direct product of those splits.

Right from the beginning and throughout the ensuing eight years, we have devoted considerable effort defending the necessity for a split and developing the theoretical and organisational foundations for a new and clearer regroupment of revolutionary forces. We have argued time and again, then and during subsequent splits from the ICC, that NONE of the specific issues in contention - the Theory of the Left in Opposition, the Machiavellianism of the Bourgeoisie, the question of Centrism, Subterranean Maturation of Consciousness etc - were of themselves, taken singly or together, sufficient cause for splitting. The problem was much more fundamental: it was not the differences themselves at issue but the ICC's complete and profound failure to either resolve them or deal with them productively within a single organisational structure without the forcible suppression of dissenters from an arbitrarily decided "Party Line".

The issue at stake is the very one which split the Bolshevik Party from the main body of the RSDLP - the question of revolutionary organisation. The sectarianism and monolithism which paralyse the milieu can not be dealt with in isolation from the question of organisation; and this is emphatically not simply a question of structures and statutes. It demands an understanding of the relationship of revolutionaries to class consciousness and the revolutionary process, of what it is that is essential in the role of communist minorities and of the fundamental, historic differences confronting the class today than in 1917.

We have dealt with these questions in issue after issue of the Bulletin, and year after year we have awaited the ICC's response to our lengthy and developed critique. Common sense would seem to suggest that any organisation which claims to take the issue of the regroupment of revolutionary forces seriously and has seen its own ranks split repeatedly on the specific question of organisation, would be eager to confront opposing political analyses of this question. But scandalously, issue 55 of International Review, almost eight years after the split, is THE FIRST TIME THE ICC HAS EVER DEALT WITH OUR POSITIONS. In many, many pages of their publications and in tens of thousands of words devoted to the CBG, they have never progressed from the events of the splits and the character of the splitters.. We will not deal here with the edifice of lies, distortions and insults they created, or their unceasing campaign of hate. That has been done already. We simply want to say here that the comrades should be ashamed of their POLITICAL failure to engage the issues. Trying to force militants and tendencies out of politics is NOT the way to clarify political differences within the milieu. The loss of comrades in these circumstances - and the ICC have lost many, many comrades in that fashion - is a profound weakening of revolutionary forces, not a strengthening as the ICC claim.

However, the ICC's hopes that the years of vilification would see the disappearance of the CBG and the political orientation defended by us have been confounded by reality. In particular, our contention that the crisis in the milieu cannot be wished away but demands a thoroughgoing re-assessment of the current period and the tasks and method of functioning of revolutionaries is finding an increasing echo, in one fashion or another within the milieu. As the ICC themselves admit, with some dismay:

" the various basic affirmations contained in the CBG's theoretical positions about the milieu ..(are) ..shared by a good part of the milieu itself."

International Review 55 Page 22.

The ICC singles out two organisations in particular who have "unconditionally capitulated" to our

alleged "theories of defeatism". The CWO's recent volte-face on the question of the nature of the period opened by 1968, their contention that this is NOT a pre-revolutionary period, and that there is a need for a "shift towards theoretical work" is bizarrely laid at our door. It is true that the CWO are (belatedly) responding to the same reality that we are concerned with - a recognition of the continued isolation of revolutionaries, and a need to re-assess the early assumptions about the current period - but their particular response to this owes nothing at all to the analyses of the CBG. The developing politics of the EFICC however, who in splitting from the IOC in similar circumstances to ourselves were forced to recapitulate much of the same work, is undeniably a direct echo.

Faced with this dismaying evidence that CBG politics will not disappear, the IOC have finally been forced to add a political attack to their campaign of vilification. As they proudly announce in *International Review* 55:

"the IOC is ready to settle accounts by going through the arguments one by one."

Let us follow them through the three major areas of their attack.

#### 1) Militant Intervention.

The IOC describes our position and practice thus:

"(the CBG has) ... an absolute conviction that in the present conditions of the class struggle, the intervention of revolutionaries plays no real role"

Accordingly, our conclusions are predictable:

"we have to stop the effort to build a centralised organisation whose task is to intervene in the class struggle: we have to dedicate ourselves to a work of study of 'open' debate..."

On one level, of course, this description of CBG practice is spectacularly silly. This is NOT what we say (despite the false quotation marks used in IR 55): it is NOT what we theorise: and it is NOT what we practise. Almost any issue of the Bulletin provides immediate evidence of our enduring commitment to militant intervention - articles and leaflets on the struggles of workers in the shipyards and the mines, textile workers, teachers, nurses, oil industry workers, car workers, the workers at GCHQ etc; leaflets on leftist mobilisations; against electoral campaigns; and against bourgeois imperialist adventures. We are no stranger to factory gates, picket lines, demos and leftist public meetings. (It is worth pointing out also, that our work within the milieu - correspondence, polemics etc - which the IOC insultingly calls "parasitism", is also a militant intervention in the working class, albeit within its revolutionary minorities.) We do not pretend, of course, that the scale or frequency of our interventionary work matches that of the IOC. Simple numbers and geographical distribution makes that impossible.

For us, there can be no conflict between intervention and theorisation. It is not a question of either/or. An organisation which does not intervene is not a revolutionary organisation.

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Theoretical work has only one justification - to understand and comprehend the external world and the struggles of our class in order to intervene in them. Theoretical clarity and militant intervention are two sides of a dialectical whole. Each depends upon and informs the other.

Among revolutionaries, the argument cannot be whether or not to intervene, but of how and when to intervene, about the timing, content and style of intervention. A leaflet at the start and highpoint of a strike will not be the same as one at the end and defeat of a struggle. The tempo of intervention will differ during periods of generalised upsurge and those periods of quiescence and passivity. The balance will be profoundly different during the depths of counter-revolution than during a pre-revolutionary period. Getting the balance right therefore, depends upon several things - understanding the nature of the general period, the specific balance of class forces, the particular level of class activity and the extent of our own resources and capacities. It is here that the argument between revolutionaries lies and it is precisely at this point that the IOC abandons argument with us, preferring instead to argue nonsensically that the CBG are against intervention. It is a very old and shoddy IOC method of argument - If you don't accept everything we say about intervention then you must reject any intervention at all.

The plain fact is, the IOC, in common with the vast majority of the milieu, have failed to come to grips with the guts of the argument on intervention because they have failed to understand fully the nature of the current period and how it differs from the last revolutionary wave. In 1917, the proletariat confronted its historic tasks after a century of struggle carried out from within the historically specific conditions of capitalism's ascendance. It is vitally important to comprehend what that means. It means not only a century of struggle resulting in real and lasting successes, but a struggle in which the Minimum and Maximum programme could exist side by side. That meant that the political dimension of the class struggle was overtly, explicitly, unceasingly part of the class's day-to-day existence. That did not mean, of course, that a majority of the class was wedded to the communist project at any given point, but it did mean a widespread awareness and understanding of its revolutionary minorities and its own political potential - a living, organic, continuous part of its experience.

The proletariat not only gained from the experience of organising itself, of creating its own organs for political and economic struggle - the Social Democratic Parties, the Trade Unions, the First and Second Internationals etc. - but just as importantly, that provided the material and political bases for the growth and work of political minorities of the class committed to communist revolution and their implantation in the heart of the class and its day to day struggles.

The organic rupture in revolutionary experience during the decades of counter-revolution makes it difficult for militants to comprehend the differences from today. In Russia within a working class of less than five million, the Bolsheviks were numbered in tens of thousands - 34,000 by 1906. In some areas, as much as 12% of all factory workers were members. Many other workers, again in tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands belonged to other revolutionary fractions - 84,000 in the RSDLP in 1907 alone. Revolutionary ideas and arguments

were totally familiar to workers. Revolutionary militants were everywhere.

" They (ie the Bolsheviks) were among the masses, at the factory benches, every day without a pause. Tens of speakers, big and little, were speaking in Petersburg, at the factories and in the barracks, every blessed day. For the masses, they had become their own people, because they were always there ... the mass lived and breathed together with the Bolsheviks."

The Menshevik Sukhanov quoted in M.Liebmans 'Leninism under Lenin'.

Before we can even begin to make a sane, balanced judgement about how best to use our resources in revolutionary intervention we have to grapple with the reality of our current situation. It is no good pretending that we are simply a smaller version of the Bolsheviks. Simple numbers give us a clue to the grotesqueness of that fallacy - revolutionary militants numbered in hundreds instead of hundreds of thousands, within a class numbered in hundreds of millions instead of less than five million. More profoundly, there is a qualitative difference: today the proletariat is attempting to confront its historic tasks after almost a century of existence and struggle within the specific conditions of capitalism's decadence. The majority of cons pay lip service to the concept of decadence and its political consequences - the counter-revolutionary nature of reformism, trade unions, parliamentarism, national liberation struggles etc - but virtually none have thought through the full implications. The rupture between the proletariat and its revolutionary history and its revolutionary minorities is profound. In the period of decadence there can be no permanent existence for the unitary organs of the class. The reformist programme and all its organisations are now irrevocably organs of the bourgeoisie - no longer proletarian terrain. **There no longer exist permanent organs of class struggle which revolutionaries can work alongside and within.** Our separation and isolation from the class is virtually total and can only be breached at very specific, favourable highpoints in open struggle. Our footholds in the class are inevitably transitory. Outside of those moments of struggle when action illuminates our intervention for the class, our ability to work politically with the mass of the class, to speak, to put forward our politics in an immediately identifiable fashion, is enormously limited, restricted, largely to individual militants moving towards mature commitment to revolutionary life.

There are two clear consequences involved in understanding this. Firstly, the potential for revolutionary minorities to even match the size and influence of revolutionary fractions prior to 1917, except during immediately pre-revolutionary, almost insurrectionary periods when the class is continuously mobilised in the factories, on the streets, in strikes and demonstrations from day to day and month to month, is severely limited. The ability of even elitist, vanguardist, tightly selected organisations like the Bolsheviks to attain (and maintain outside immediate highpoints of struggle) something approaching a mass character disappeared with capitalism's period of ascendance. The material and political basis for that does not exist in our period. We cannot have a serious discussion about the most fruitful use of

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revolutionary resources until this is grasped. It is the failure to do this that lies behind the various panic responses to the current impasse in the revolutionary milieu.

The present milieu came into existence with several, largely unexamined assumptions - that the economic crisis would deepen and spread inexorably, class response would develop accordingly both quantitatively and qualitatively, and the revolutionary movement would grow progressively along with it. The current disarray in the milieu has been produced directly from the failure to understand why this third assumption has not been fulfilled. On the one hand, we have the immediatism of groups like Wildcat and the CWO who are swamped by activism with each upturn in struggle - trying fantastically to build wildly inappropriate networks of non-existent factory groups, or being overwhelmed by the sheer spectacle of riots etc - only to fall into the trough of demoralisation at each downturn, disbanding in the case of Wildcat, and calling for a retreat into theorisation in the CWO. On the other hand, we have the hysterical triumphalism of the ICC who have clapped a Nelsonian eye-patch on each eye and insist that there is no crisis in the milieu, that the movement goes from strength to strength according to plan and cannot understand that a simple replay of 1917 is not on.

It is **NOT** defeatism to realise our situation is profoundly different from the Bolsheviks and to plan accordingly. To understand why our growth has been, and will be, more limited than the Bolsheviks and the KAPD and that that is not a cause for panic is to provide a stable foundation for continued work. It allows us to understand that intervention at the point of struggle must have a relatively much greater importance now than in pre-1917 and that agitational intervention in the class, and organisational work in the milieu must assume much more importance than general propaganda work. Only the ICC could argue that that is a recipe for:

" ...stopping the effort to build a centralised organisation whose task is to intervene in the class struggle."

On the contrary, it is a recipe for abandoning the search for magical devices to short-circuit our isolation, for realising that there are no short-cuts, that we cannot by our own efforts produce movement in the class, but must rely on acting within the class's own activity. The class can hear us best precisely at the point that its own action begins to break from its constraints, when it begins to be forced to consider self-organisation and generalisation. Our ability to persuade the class into that by propaganda is enormously more limited than the qualitative impact our intervention can have when political maturation is placed on the agenda by the necessities of struggle. We could not have produced the events in Poland 1980 no matter how hyper-active we became, but who can fail to realise the profound potential of even the smallest intervention once the upheavals had begun?

This is not to argue that "...there is no real role for revolutionary intervention in the present conditions" but is to be more precise about what that role is and how it differs from the last revolutionary wave.

Although it is not within the scope of this article, it is worth pointing out in passing that

the ICC's blind triumphalism about the state of the milieu is exactly mirrored in its attempts to understand the development of the class struggle. Regular readers of the ICC's press over the years will know that to read any issue at any time is to be told that the struggle is deeper, more developed and more advanced than it was before. Unable, unwilling to admit to any setback or impasse in the class struggle, the ICC has arrived at a situation where it cannot understand the difference between class militancy and genuine developments in consciousness and organisation. Every sign that the class has not allowed past defeats to destroy its willingness to fight is hailed as a qualitative advance. Right next to the article in *International Review* 55 which we are responding to here and which so signally failed to comprehend the crisis in the revolutionary milieu, is an article on Poland which repeats the identical failures in assessing the class struggle. Certainly, the wave of recent struggle in Poland demonstrates the failure of past defeats to destroy militancy, and that is not insignificant because it provides the basis for the class to transcend those defeats; but that demands developments in consciousness and organisation which are profoundly missing in these strikes.

In terms of spreading the strikes, generalisation of the struggle and its aims, self-organisation, sheer scale and in self-consciousness the current wave of strikes falls enormously short of 1980. It demonstrates the depth of the political defeat that has been inflicted on the Polish working class. Despite being forced, on the level of evidence, to recognise that there is indeed:

"...a very tangible retreat in the strength of the working class"

the ICC rush ahead to declare this "superficial". On the contrary:

"Nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, the recent struggles of the proletariat in Poland provide a clear confirmation of the whole perspective put forward by our organisation for twenty years: more than ever this is a time of the unfolding and intensification of the class struggle."

(IR 55 page 5.)

This triumphalism, and the necessary distortion of reality in its defence can be found in all the ICC's coverage of class struggle.

In reality, the unfolding of the class struggle, like the development of revolutionary minorities, has been enormously more complex and hesitant than all of us (including the ICC) foresaw. The proletariat worldwide has not lacked combativity but the obstacles impeding developments in consciousness and self-organisation are formidable. To recognise this and to explore the reasons for it is not defeatism but the only way to build a sound foundation for effective, enduring revolutionary work. It is the only way to avoid the current rash of panic and demoralisation.

## 2) CENTRALISATION

The second leg of the ICC's attack on our politics is their contention that we have abandoned political centralisation as an essential method of organisation. We are told that:

"The CBG triumphantly attained at the beginning of the eighties ... an exalted level of struggle against any militant, centralised activity."

(IR 55 P21)

And that we have concluded:

"we have to stop the effort to build a centralised organisation."  
(Ibid.)

What type of argument is this? Have the ICC never read our publications? Do they really not know we have written article after article arguing exactly the opposite? Or, more likely, are they merely hoping that their own readers have not read our publications?

We first identified ourselves as a specific grouping within the multiple 1981 splits from the ICC precisely on the defence of centralisation. Against the localist and federalist arguments of the elements who formed NOWar, the Ultra-Left Review and Wildcat, we insisted:

"...the international nature of the working class and the necessity for there to be political minorities force the conclusion that only a centrally, organised, international class party can play a fruitful role in the class struggle."

(Bulletin 2. "The Ultra-Left Review: Vehicle Without Lights.")

That entire text, like many others which followed it, was specifically and precisely aimed at the defence of the centralised party and the absolute rejection of federalism and localism. The proletariat enters history as a class without intrinsic antagonisms. Although it is physically and ideologically fragmented by its day-to-day existence within capitalism, it carries within it the potential for unification globally and politically. An international class, it is united by a single common response wherever, and however, it is confronted by capitalism - the overthrow of class society. Of necessity, the political expressions of the proletariat, both its unitary organs and its political fractions, mirror its nature and historical tasks. A class party can be nothing other than international and centralised. That is an unavoidable starting point for revolutionary organisation and it was precisely our starting point in the constituting of the CBG. In the very first article announcing the formation of the CBG we stated explicitly:

"...for us, the achievements of clarity and the creation of a milieu to defend that clarity in an organised, continuing and stable fashion, is inseparable from the commitment to the necessity for a centralised party."

What could be clearer? The stupidities of the ICC's allegations are designed to avoid the real argument between revolutionaries - what kind of centralisation. And the answer to that depends upon an understanding of the role of revolutionaries in the development of the proletariat's struggles and consciousness within the unfolding of



the revolutionary process. Because the last revolutionary wave took place right at the beginning of the epoch of capitalism's decadence, revolutionary fractions (and the class itself) entered the battle still weighed down by illusions and inadequacies of the past without fully comprehending the implications of the new period.

The legacy of a century of Social-Democratic work, the conceptions and methods of organisation appropriate to it, lingered on even after it was clear that Social Democracy itself had been transformed in the development of state capitalism and had passed into the camp of capital. Generations of playing an active role, in fact the major role, in the creation and day-to-day running of the organs that the proletariat had thrown up to pursue its economic, social and political goals in the nineteenth century - the Trade Unions, mass parliamentary parties etc - obscured what it was that was essential in the role of revolutionary fractions both in the class's actions and within the development of its consciousness.

This failure of understanding was expressed most clearly in the conceptions of Lenin defended in "What Is to Be Done?" and "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back." For the Lenin of this period, the proletariat was capable of achieving only a very limited form of consciousness - a Trade Union consciousness. From this view, a genuine revolutionary, class consciousness could only be the product of, and could only reside in, the Party. The Party was thus charged not only with the organisation of the class but of the revolution itself. The creator and bearer of revolutionary consciousness, the Party thus bore the same relationship to the class as the General Staff does to an army. Only the Party by its cogitations could see the way ahead, plan the strategy and give out the orders for the implementation of tactics and action.

This vision of the proletariat as a largely unthinking mass with the Party as its brain was necessarily mirrored in the organisation of the Party itself - an unthinking rank and file with the central organs as the "...only thinking element".

It is obvious what type of organisation and centralisation flows from this. Leading the class into revolution like a General leading troops into battle requires a "unity of action" which itself requires complete submission to the authority of the central organs. Internal democracy is dismissed as "only of benefit to the police". Centralisation exists to implement the will of the centre. Political discipline becomes the discipline of the barrackroom, or in Lenin's phrase, "the discipline of the factory".

"The political purpose of an organ having such great powers is understandable only if those powers apply to the elaboration of a uniform plan of action, if the central organ assumes the initiative of a vast revolutionary act."

(R. Luxemburg - "Leninism or Marxism")

Even during the last revolutionary wave itself, when revolutionary fractions had tens, even hundreds of thousands of members, it was obvious to some elements of the revolutionary movement, in particular the German Left, that the material basis for such a role for the Party did not exist. Of necessity, the Party could only be a fraction, a

23. minority of the class. The mass parties of Social Democracy disappeared with the progressive era of capitalism.

"Therefore a small Party everywhere."  
(H. Gorter - "The Organisation of the Proletariat's Class Struggle".)

"Can this one small Party simultaneously rule this mighty adversary, massively armed capitalism, and the mighty proletariat? Can it be the dictator, the despotic ruler or both of adversary and proletariat? The very numbers rule it out."

(Ibid.)

Today, with the added experience of seventy years of the reality of capitalist decadence, it is even clearer that the ability of revolutionary fractions to function as the organiser of the class, the order-giver, can never be a major element of revolutionary activity. We are smaller, more isolated and more separate from the class, to a degree not dreamed of by Gorter, and that condition will persist unavoidably except during the ferment of the pre-revolutionary period. In this situation, it is much easier to see the much greater clarity of the German Left, in particular Rosa Luxemburg and Gorter, on the whole question of the relationship between the Party, class and the revolutionary process. The CBG stand squarely with Luxemburg when she argues that it is the class's own activity which is at the heart of both developing consciousness and the unfolding of the revolutionary act.

The proletariat creates its own consciousness in action. The political clarity which its revolutionary fractions bring to that is an indispensable part of that process, but is not synonymous with the class consciousness which will complete the proletariat's historic task. It is merely an essential part of the whole. At times, on specific issues, on specific aspects of understanding, the class in action will (and did many times in the last revolutionary wave) run ahead of its political fractions. But however advanced the achievements of specific moments of struggle, they must necessarily dead-end in the limitations of consciousness possible in the mass of the class at any given moment. The unmistakable cul-de-sac the Polish working class found themselves in in 1980 despite the enormous advances in self-organisation, generalisation and confronting state power, is a clear example of both the potential of class struggle and its limitations lacking a revolutionary intervention. It is only the political and programmatic clarity of the Party which allows those momentary advances to be synthesised and transcended.

It is precisely here that we find the essence of revolutionary praxis. We give shape and direction to the struggle: we point the way forward by the clarity of our slogans and programme from within the richness and complexity of the proletariat's own action. We do not have a ready-made blueprint for that. We cannot foresee in advance, no matter how sharp we are, all the turbulence and unexpectedness of class struggle, the twists and turns, the sudden outbursts and periods of quiescence: we cannot order it into life, we cannot plan it, we cannot organise it.



Even the political clarity we bring to the struggle cannot be some finished, complete vision. It is a living and changing product of the struggle itself, both shaping and being shaped in one dialectical moment. As the class confronts each obstacle, its actions delineate the solutions, action and consciousness flowing into one another, throughout the revolutionary process. Programmatic clarity depends upon that even as it intervenes in it. It is a product of the whole not of the part. It is a process not a thing.

" The activity of the Party organisation, the growth of the proletariat's awareness of the struggle and the struggle itself are not different things separated chronologically and mechanically. They are only different aspects of the same process."  
(R.Luxemburg - Leninism or Marxism)

Centralisation, the way that we organise our work, exists in order to facilitate this living process of clarification. It is not a device for implementing the will of the centre, for the dispensation of a ready-made clarity. There is no room within this vision for the "discipline of the factory". No single element produces or owns clarity, neither within the Party, within the political milieu nor within the class as a whole. Centralisation is the method which allows the active participation of all within this process of clarification. It opens up the Party to the radicalising influence of the class and to those elements of the Party closest to the class in action. We do not need a centralisation designed to allow us to manage the class and its struggles, or for one part of the organisation to create and dispense its own ready-made clarity to the rest. Central organs are neither the repository of clarity nor ideological policemen.

Today, more than ever before, it is absolutely necessary to be clear on the question of organisation. The "discipline of the factory" was a profoundly mistaken approach even pre-1917 within the Bolshevik Party, but they were able to transcend it in action during the heat of the revolution and in the pre-revolutionary period by virtue of their sheer size, political vitality, and most importantly, their implantation in the class. The class itself transformed the Bolsheviks' organisational inadequacies.

In the present period, all is changed. Our resources, in terms of numbers and influence, are incredibly small. We are isolated and separated from the class more profoundly than ever before. Our situation is historically unprecedented. Divorced from the invigorating effect of the life of the class, and lacking the natural checks and balances which flow from that, the pressures towards a sect-like behaviour with all its paraphernalia - bureaucracy, cliquism, solvism - must be enormous. We can only combat the crushing weight of monolithism and sectarianism if we understand its roots and its mechanisms.

It is not enough to recognise the nightmare evolution and practices of the ICC in its sectarian degeneracy; we must know how to go forward from that and how to avoid its fate. Those elements within the ICC who are critical of its operations, and those elements who have already left must ask themselves precisely where the problem lies. Is it simply that the central organs (and therefore the organisation as a whole) have defended the wrong

positions? Is it because they have abused the mechanism of centralisation? Or is it something more profound? And if it is the latter, what are the alternatives? Is it possible to go forward from the ICC with a different set of positions but the same practice? We have argued repeatedly that that is not possible and have tried in article after article to spell out the solution.

For a more detailed and concrete look at the question of centralisation in particular we refer readers to Bulletin 3. (Copies on request.) In that text, we argue that it is not possible to avoid the fate of the ICC simply by the production in advance of formal constitutional guarantees, but that even if we cannot be clear on the details of how centralisation must function, we can be clear on what it is we want it to achieve.

a) Centralisation is necessary to promote the process of clarification which is the pre-condition for intervention.

b) Centralisation exists to allow the active participation of all, not to implement the will of the centre.

c) Central organs are neither the creators nor guardians of clarity. Its role in our internal discussions is not to take up positions on our behalf but to impose coherence on the discussions, to draw out the lessons and try to point out the most fruitful direction for future development.

d) When the demands of action require it, central organs are charged with speaking and acting as the voice of the organisation. That is done, not in isolation, but as part and parcel of the process of giving shape and voice to the concerns of the organisation as a whole, and is always subject to continuing debate. Just as the Party cannot substitute itself for the class as a whole, so the central organs cannot substitute themselves for the organisation as a whole.

### 3) REGROUPMENT/ PROGRAMMATIC IDENTITY.

The third leg of the ICC's attack on our politics is the contention that we no longer recognise the necessity for an organisation built round well-defined programmatic clarity. Instead, they claim, we want to:

" ...dedicate ourselves to a work of study and 'open' debate, in which we will participate, at a level of formal equality, militant organisations, individuals and circles who have nothing better to do."

We want to build:

" ...an open, democratic party, in which everyone is free to say and do whatever they please."

This is all fine knockabout stuff. However, it bears as much resemblance to serious political debate as a Punch and Judy show does to a Shakespeare play. Members of the CGB do not join out of vague sympathy and a willingness to do something, but out of a commitment to the defence of a tightly defined Platform. Members are not free to reject the concept of capitalist decadence. They are not free to argue about the class nature of reformism or Trade Unions. They cannot argue that these organs can be taken over and

transformed. They cannot argue for support, "critical" or otherwise, of national liberation struggles. They must accept that there are no progressive factions of the bourgeoisie today, and that all the so-called "communist" and "socialist" states are simply a particular form of decadent capitalism. They cannot argue that imperialism and state capitalism are optional extras for capital. They must accept Marxism as an indispensable tool of revolutionary work. They must accept the necessity for the leading role of a centralised and international Party in the revolutionary process.

In addition, they must accept the POLITICAL PRACTICE within which the defence and promulgation of these positions are undertaken. That includes a clearly defined internal practice; a specific orientation towards the rest of the proletarian milieu including a clearly stated basis for future regroupment; and a well-defined understanding of interventionary work within the class.

This is the political essence of the centralisation discussed in the last section. Communists (and the CBG) have no room for organisations in which individuals refuse to undertake aspects of organisational work, or contribute to the press or refuse to hand out leaflets because they personally do not think it is worthwhile. That is a practice alien to proletarian revolutionary work.

So what is left of the ICC's contention that the CBG is a group in which everyone is "free to say and do whatever they please"? Is this meant to be a serious argument? Once again, we are offered an imbecility, an insult, in place of the vital, necessary political debate. The argument between us is not about anarchism or communism, but of how to organise communist work. It is about how a communist organisation defines itself programmatically, how it relates to the other revolutionary fractions of the proletariat, and how to undertake the process of regroupment which will underlie the creation of the future Party. We have stated clearly and at length in our past publications exactly where we stand on these issues. We have put our analyses forward, not as holy writ, but as a contribution to a debate. We accept the possibility that our understanding is wrong, confused or inadequate and therefore we are open to responsible criticism. The ICC, and its supporters, must ask themselves why they have not responded in this fashion, instead preferring the triumphant demolition of straw men, the rejection of positions which are not held.

The fact of the matter is, that far from arguing that all positions are "equally valid" and have equal weight, we start from a totally contrary position. It is the sectarian practices of groups like the CWO, and the ICC itself, in which positions are programmatically incorporated in organisational identity at the drop of a hat, which fail to realise that political work depends precisely on being able to differentiate between the relative importance of specific positions. We enter the sterile world of the sect when we cannot tell the difference between a position like the bourgeois nature of reformism and Luxemburg's theory of economics. One is a class line, one is a contribution to revolutionary debate. Differences on the first lead to different political actions and cannot be contained in a single organisation, while differences on the second merely enrich the debate. It is the current inability of much of the milieu to distinguish between what is vital to the identity of an organisation and what is merely part of the process of clarification, which constitutes the flesh and blood of sectarianism and nonolithism.

The rupture between political fractions and the class as a whole which has been imposed upon us by the very nature of capitalist decadence, has condemned us to severe isolation and extreme tinniness of resources. We described one of the political consequences of this rupture in the very first text we published as a specifically defined tendency.

"First of all, it means a major weakening in the process by which revolutionary fractions give voice and shape to the clarity which emerges from the activity of the class as a whole. The rupture between the class and its revolutionaries means that the process of clarification so vital to the tasks of revolutionaries is condemned to take place in considerable isolation from its material base. The day-to-day contact with the life of the class, the unceasing interplay between communist militants and the class as a whole at every level of struggle, which was enjoyed as a matter of course by revolutionary fractions of the past, is totally denied to us. When revolutionaries of the last wave 'reflected' on the lessons of the class's experience they did so as a living part of the class in a fashion which allowed them not only a sensitivity to the twists and turns of the developments of the class's consciousness, but more importantly, provided them with an immediate feedback on the validity of their 'reflections'. The Bolsheviks were implanted in the heart of the class not only because of their political clarity, but dialectically, the opposite was also true. They were politically clear because they were at the heart of the class.

For us, however, the situation is quite different. Not only are we forced to carry on the process of clarification from the position of virtual bystanders, but the fruits of this process, the political positions which underpin our activity, are not subject to the same testing in the fires of the actual struggle. We cannot tell how valid or how wrong a position is simply by the response of the class to it since the response is nearly always the same - nil. In this situation, there is almost nothing to guard against an arbitrariness in the emergence of positions and in the weight we accord them."

(Bulletin 3 - A New Regroupment.)

None of this means that we must be condemned to paralysis for fear of error. What it does mean is that we must exercise much greater caution about when to take up a position, about when it is necessary for any particular position to become part of the organisation's identity, and about what that means for our relations with the rest of the milieu and for our own internal debate.

The clearest lesson of revolutionary history, particularly the experience of Russia pre-1917, is that neither clarity nor the Party itself, was the product of a single fraction. The process of clarification, the process of regroupment involved the confrontation of ideas, analyses and action within the whole of the milieu. There was never a single finished clarity. It was the product of a long, painful process through the revolution of 1905 up to the October revolution itself. It is a profound misreading of history to imagine that the Party of 1917, its positions, its practice and its composition was simply the Bolshevik fraction of 1903 writ large. No single fraction ever had a monopoly of the totality of political clarity at any given point. No-one got everything right. In the final result, the Party of 1917, its programmatic clarity and its political practice was a synthesis of many different elements springing from the interaction of the entire milieu with the onward, clarifying thrust of the class.

What was important was not some mythical, static clarity but the entire process of clarification. To a very real extent, the bulk of the positions which had animated and divided the milieu in the two decades before 1917 were swept aside as irrelevant as the mass action of the class and the outbreak of War delineated irrevocably the positions which were to define revolutionaries.

If we understand that the clarity we defend at any given point is necessarily a limited and incomplete one, and that the process of clarification is not a system of divine revelation, but one of debate and the confrontation of ideas within a fighting intervention in the actual struggles of the class, then we can understand that the differences within the revolutionary movement are not a sign of weakness or immaturity, but are inevitable and necessary. That means that the ability of an organisation to contain within it, and to express, openly and publicly, that richness of diversity inseparable from the process of clarification, is a fundamental strength. Unceasing debate, open and public, is the lifeblood of revolutionary action. It is what makes the organisation a living part of the revolutionary process.

If we are to go beyond the sectarian and monolithic nightmare of the ICC, we must understand the practical and organisational consequences of rejecting their destructive practice. Firstly, their willingness to leap into programmatic commitment at every twist and turn of every discussion is the very bricks and mortar of sectarianism. An endless stream of new "positions" - Subterranean Maturation of Consciousness, the Theory of the Weakest Link, Centism as the Greatest Danger, etc. - is not a contribution to defining "the FUNDAMENTAL political divergences which exist between the main currents of the revolutionary movement." (IR 55) On the contrary, it is a cudgel to suppress internal debate and a sectarian fence to fend off the rest of the milieu. Sects thrive precisely via this endless programmatic accumulation of a "thousand secondary refinements".

Programmatic incorporation of a position, over and above the class lines, is necessary only when it has a defining effect on an organisation's action and practice. Even at that point, it is essential that debate at every level, internal and public, remains alive. That means that the free operation of tendencies and factions, with expression in the central organs and in the public forums of the organisation is not something to be feared or

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suppressed.

Secondly, if we understand that the process of clarification and regroupment cannot be the property of any one fraction, we must have no timidity in opening up our life and activity to the rest of the milieu. Revolutionary forces today are too fragile, tiny and fragmented to tolerate the criminally sectarian behaviour of a group like the ICC who casually announce that failure to pay arrears of dues removes ex-comrades from the ranks of the proletarian movement, or like the CWO, who equally casually announced that failure to accept their view of the significance of 1921 meant being counter-revolutionary. We must recognise the existence of a milieu and its shared community of interest which demands an unavoidable commitment to ongoing debate, joint work where possible, and the widest possible regroupment of revolutionary forces.

Clearly, the conditions for the emergence of a Party are not yet on the agenda. We cannot by an act of will summon up the Zimmerwald of tomorrow, but we believe that the basis for a regroupment more widespread than hitherto does exist within the parameters we have touched on within this text. The way forward is precisely on the abandonment of a "thousand secondary refinements" for organisational identity and an understanding of what is essential

- the class lines, already definitively decided by the experience of the class, contained in the Platform;

- those positions which directly effect action, both within the struggles of the class and in the way we organise our own internal work.

Regroupment will involve the active participation of the milieu as a whole and will not simply be achieved by the "victory" of any single organisation and its positions.

If the ICC are serious about their responsibilities, we invite them to respond to what it is we actually say and do, and turn their backs on empty, vituperative bluster.

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#### ADDENDUM: CWO - BLOWING IN THE WIND.

Although the above text was written as a specific response to an article by the ICC, it also provides an extended political response to the letter from the CWO which we printed in the last Bulletin. The crux of this letter was basically contained in the formulation:

" Whither (if anywhere) the CBG."

The writer goes on to lament the CBG's lack of growth and organisational success since its foundation.

" Well, you have blown the trumpets all these years and the walls of Jericho have not tumbled down. For whatever reasons...the milieu has not responded at all...Not only that, but I'm sure you would agree that apart from a few international refugees, the CBG has attracted no-one to its ranks. Now it is true that all groups are doing badly at the moment, but

your own lack of impact is unparalleled, except for, significantly, the EFICC."

This Imasse the CWO considers to be the cause of the CBG's "existential angst".

Despite the seriousness of the issues there is an irresistible element of comedy in all this. Reading the letter, we step right into the hoary, old comedy sketch about the man visiting a psychiatrist "on behalf of a friend". "Doctor, Doctor, I'm not asking for myself, you understand. It's for a friend. He thinks he's a revolutionary communist and he's in despair because he doesn't know what's happening or what to do about the future."

The "angst" which so pre-occupies the writer clearly resides rather closer to home than the CBG. For of all the fractions in the revolutionary milieu, the CWO is showing the greatest signs of panic and demoralisation. It was only last year that they announced that:

" the conditions for a generalised revival of class struggle DO NOT EXIST."

(WV Feb/Mar 88.)

This was followed up by the abandonment of their once-held position that 1968 was the opening of a new revolutionary period; In fact, by the abandonment of even the concept of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary periods. Instead, for CWO, we are now in a period of "increasing capitalist domination" which can be broken only in immediately pre-revolutionary situations. Not surprisingly, the conclusions were that the immediate task for revolutionaries was simple survival which demanded a retreat into theoretical work. The damage which this demoralisation is producing on their theoretical clarity is also unmistakable with serious regression on the understanding of state capitalism, an inability to understand the longevity of the economic crisis, incoherence about work in unions, and perhaps even a retreat on the fundamental concept of capitalist decadence.

The Imasse which the CWO ascribe to the CBG is in reality the condition of the whole revolutionary milieu. There is no qualitative difference between the state of the CBG and that of the CWO or any other fraction. We are discussing a 'milieu' numbered world-wide in hundreds. The larger organisations count their numbers in dozens, if they are lucky. This situation has persisted since the re-emergence of the communist movement in the early seventies. It is a continuing situation and not simply a question of "doing badly at the moment". What is significant in this situation is not whether one organisation gains an extra half-dozen at the expense of another - that is political myopia approaching blindness. What is significant is the qualitative difference between revolutionary fractions today and in the last revolutionary wave. Our situation is historically unprecedented. We are smaller and more isolated from the class than ever before. We have to recognise that and understand that it is a direct product of the material conditions of capitalist decadence and not simply of a contingent downturn of the struggle. It will persist for the foreseeable future.

Today, with their retreat into theoretical work, the CWO are showing clear evidence of an awareness

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of the dilemma facing the revolutionary movement. However, the limitations of that awareness are also clearly evident.

" 'Why in a period of rising class struggle is the vanguard doing so badly?' The problem is wrongly phrased, or rather, there is no problem. The vanguard is doing badly because this is not a period of 'pre-revolution' but a period of (increasing) capitalist domination."

With one bound our hero was free! The intellectual feat of gymnastics involved here in making the recognition of a problem the very act of rendering it invisible is truly breathtaking. To say that it begs the question is a considerable understatement. Do they recognise that "doing badly" means a qualitative difference in our situation than in pre-1917 when revolutionaries certainly "did badly" from time to time? Do they think that this will be a permanent condition outside of a "pre-revolutionary" period? What is the mechanism that will transport us from our present fragility to the full-blown strength of a "pre-revolutionary" period? Have the original assumptions about progressive and accumulating growth been abandoned with the conception of this being a revolutionary period? If so, what effect does that have on the organisation of our work?

Eight years ago when we first insisted on the urgency of these questions, and on the reality of the crisis in the revolutionary milieu, the CWO responded by dismissing our contribution as "generalities" and "banalities". Today, they insist that the only way out for us is to "re-orient our activities ... towards a new political direction" (presumably to that of the CWO). We think it is justifiable to ask "which CWO?". For the fact of the matter is, our politics and our perspectives have stood the test of time enormously better than the CWO's. They have changed so fundamentally, it is true to say that in a very real sense they are no longer the same organisation they were eight years ago. They have abandoned a multitude of individual positions (once claimed to be essential), rejected an entire revolutionary tradition (the German Left), replaced an "Old Methodology" for a "New Methodology" (indistinguishable to outsiders), are now in the process of abolishing "meta-historical categories" and are suffering clear regression in theoretical clarity. In the field of intervention they have gone from the grotesque voluntarism of building non-existent factory and unemployed workers' groups to arguing for simple survival in theoretical work. They have shown themselves incapable of holding a clear and consistent assessment of the nature of the period, the level of class struggle or the tasks of revolutionaries.

Comrades, this is not the basis for a rational and balanced, long-term organisation of political work.

The over-riding problem for revolutionaries today is first of all, to simply recognise our isolation and fragility and to understand its material basis. Secondly, we have to understand what the consequences are for our work long-run, how it must effect our interventionary work, how we organise ourselves and what it means for the process of regroupment. We have stated at length in many articles, and again in the above text, where we stand on this. More than any other organisation, we have been clear-sighted on where revolutionaries



are today and how to go forward realistically. The past eight years have seen the validation of our perspectives and positions in very stark contrast to the dramatic vacillations of the CWO. We hope the comrades will trust us seriously when we say it is immensely more appropriate to reverse their invitation. It is the CWO which is at a crossroads

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and needs to seek a new political direction. A productive beginning could be made by making, after eight years, a serious response to our politics.

**Cormack**  
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## Notes From Page 39.

(1) A non-materialist survey can be found In *The Idea of Progress* by J.D.Bury.

(2) For significant discussions which touch upon this see Karl Marx's *Theory of History* by G.A.Cohen and *Making History* by A.Collins.

(3) Crucial works here are *Studies In the Development of Capitalism* M.Dobb, *The Transition From Feudalism to Capitalism* ed. R.Hilton, *Passages From Antiquity to Feudalism and Lineages of the Absolutist State*, P.Anderson; additionally Engell's *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* is also a major valuable source.

(4) The CWO misses the point when it writes "The suffering and misery it (capitalism) inflicted on the working class is not the issue" (RP 21 p26). Misery imposed by capitalism is a central issue for it is upon this that larger class conflict is engendered and not only this, it is the question around which more often than not individuals are drawn into revolutionary commitments.

(5) F. Sternberg, starting from a Luxemburgist economics cogently argued that the immediate post

World War 2 situation would see a crisis of capitalism to match that which followed 1918 (see *The Coming Crisis*). In the event the optimism on the possibility of a large class response c.1945 was not fulfilled.

(6) One of the debates which has raged through the revolutionary movement for the past two decades is that on the question of the economic basis of capitalism. Ranged against the Luxemburgist analysis is that of the Falling Rate of Profit (defended by the CBG) exemplified in the work of Henryk Grossman and Paul Mattick. Irrespective of how one argues about the ins and outs of these distinct theories it is undoubtedly true to say that correct political conclusions can flow from either one. Thus, although the CBG sees the saturation of markets theory as incorrect we nonetheless acknowledge the correctness of Rosa Luxemburg's political positions which were linked to a belief in the decadence of the capitalist system.

(7) For an examination of how decadence and the defeats of the 1920s affected the role of revolutionary organisations and their relationships to the working class see correspondence with PC published elsewhere in Bulletin 14.



# CAPITALIST DECADENCE

## — A RESTATEMENT

The following article is written as a specific contribution to the Conference "The Market and Bureaucracy in Capitalism". At first glance it might seem that an exposition on the meaning of capitalist decadence was only of marginal relevance to the subject of the conference. However the CBG believes that there is a certain amount of confusion among participants. We are of the opinion that important as the questions of market and bureaucracy are, they can only be understood within a broad historical-political context ie. the decadence of capital. It seems that such an understanding does not underpin the political frameworks of elements participating in the conference. Additional to this there is the particular case of the **Communist Workers Organisation**. Over the past two years it has visibly panicked in the face of the so-called Thatcherite Revolution and in the process appears to have abandoned a central plank of the theory of capitalist decadence.

In the midst of the Russian Revolution Nikolai Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhensky wrote that:

"We are thus confronted by two alternatives, and two only. There must either be complete disintegration, hell broth, further brutalisation and disorder, ABSOLUTE CHAOS, OR ELSE COMMUNISM."

(ABC of Communism 1919/20)

These few words sum up not only the nature of the deadly struggle then being fought out but also the idea that at a given moment the historical validity of capitalism evaporates to be replaced by that of Communism. In a phrase the capitalist mode of production ceases to be a progressive formation, it enters its decadence and communism becomes a real possibility. Undoubtedly debates on the nature of capitalist progress-decadence are generally strewn with theoretical concepts and structures. This however does not mean that they are simply of academic interest. Quite the contrary is true. The revolution which revolutionaries in the past, and those of today, approached and answered the questions associated with the debates guided them in their revolutionary activities. Problems such as what is the meaning of national liberation, social democracy and state capitalism are resolved according to how one sees the historical development of the capitalist mode of production.

### Marx and Progress.

It is not my intention to give a history lesson on the "idea of progress" and its obverse, decadence.(1) Suffice it to say that belief in the rise and fall of societies is one which is of great antiquity and crosses diverse cultures, stretching, for example, from Greek slave society through feudalism to Nineteenth Century Industrial capitalism. My concern here is to sketch out some of the elements which were to be found in revolutionary philosophy, specifically that of Marxism. I choose the writings of Marx because his body of work is that which underpins our present day understanding of capitalist decadence. If it is thought by some that this smacks of genuflecting

before The Master then so be it. Such a belief is born of a misapprehension of Marx and the contribution he made to revolutionary thought.

Marx, drawing upon both secular and christian philosophies, adopted and adapted notions of progress to analyse and explain the mechanics of social organisation. Marx's philosophical guide Hegel believed that the progress of world history was the "development of the idea of freedom" and to the extent that social organisation was rationally developed then so the goal of history would be achieved. For Marx this Idealism of Hegel was wrongheaded (but not the structure). In the marxian mode progressive development was posited upon the movement of material forces ie. social and economic organisation. Just as Hegel believed that there was a goal in history so also did Marx.(2) Using Hegelian terms he wrote of the goal thus:

" Communism as the positive transcendence of formal property as human estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man . . . Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution." (Econ. Phil. Manuscripts.)

As Marx developed his historical materialism so he demonstrated that this revolution was to be achieved by the action of the working class for it was the carrier of the subjectivity necessary for solving the "riddle of history".

It's worth saying here that whilst Marx's historical materialism is a philosophy which logically demonstrates the necessity (not to be confused with inevitability) of capitalist crisis and socialism this in no way means that his work is cold, isolated, "scientific rationality". Marx had a moral sense which was outraged by the depravities of class society. He raged against the murderous consequences of the capitalist mode of production just as other Nineteenth Century socialists did. However, unlike those socialists who were content to remain at the general level of moral outrage, Marx stepped further and demonstrated that the

class system, specifically the capitalist mode of production, had a political and economic logic which gave the possibility of its dissolution and transcendence.

In *The German Ideology* Marx depicted the patterns of social change:

" In the place of an earlier form of intercourse, which has become a fetter, a new one is put, corresponding to the more developed productive forces and, hence, to the advanced mode of the self-activity of individuals - a form which in its turn becomes a fetter and is then replaced by another. Since these conditions correspond at every stage to the simultaneous development of the productive forces, their history is at the same time the history of the evolving productive forces taken over by each new generation, and is, therefore, the history of the development of the forces of the individuals themselves."

Whilst Marx did not devote himself to systematically delineating the history of the progress of class formations it is undoubtedly true that his belief in a particular typological/stadial pattern to history underpins much of his writings. Basically he broke progressive class formations into four modes of production: Asiatic, Slavery, Feudalism and Capitalism. Just two examples of where this typology occurs. Firstly the **Communist Manifesto**:

" the modern bourgeoisie is itself the product of a long course of development of a series of revolutions in the modes of production and of exchange."

And this bourgeoisie sprang from the "ruins of feudal society," probably the best known example of Marx's (and perhaps his most schematic) is found in his *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* where he notes that:

" At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production ... Then begins an epoch of social revolution ... No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and a new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself ... The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production."

In *Capital* Marx explores the mechanics of bourgeois production and in doing so pinpoints the elements which constitute its progressive nature and at the same time establish the basis for decadence. Capitalism is driven by the need to accumulate capital, is inherently competitive and is founded upon the exploitation of wage labour. The combination of these circumstances produces a

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particular social formation with its own particular problems.

Via the competitive mechanism capitalists are constantly forced to develop the productive process:

" Hand in hand with this centralisation (a product of capitalist competition), or this expropriation of many capitalists by a few, develop, on an ever-extending scale, the co-operative form of the labour process, the conscious technical application of science, the methodological cultivation of the soil, the transformation of the instruments of labour into instruments of labour only usable in common, the economising of all means of production of combined socialised labour, the entanglement of all peoples in the net of the world-market, and with this, the international character of the capitalist regime."

(*Capital* Vol. 1)

And:

" Development of the productive forces of social labour is the historical task and justification of capital. This is just the way in which it unconsciously creates the material requirements of a higher mode of production."

(*Capital* Vol. 3)

Working within this general abstraction Marx foresees the situation where the capitalist economy extends itself globally and manufactures a cooperative form of labour to the extent that it has at one and the same time created the objective basis for socialism as well as the class which will attack and destroy it. It is then that the progressive "tasks" of capitalism are completed; it is then that the system enters its dotage; it is then that socialism becomes a real possibility. Once again to quote Marx:

" Thus the Integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated."

(*Capital* Vol. 1)

Much work has gone into showing how Marx's typological view is justified by historical events. It is no easy matter to map the general abstractions employed by Marx onto complex historical reality. But historical study has shown that a materialist approach which employs the theory of stadial social development has great validity. This is not to say that all Marx claims is demonstrably true: for example the so-called Asiatic mode of production is notoriously difficult to handle; one problem it seems to face, among others, is that unlike other modes of production it does not seem to have its own internal logic of rise and fall but is subject to decline through external forces. (3) But having said this the general approach is valid and is specifically so in the case of capitalism.

At another level Marx's idea of the progress and decadence of social formations seems to be problematic to the extent that it apparently commits revolutionaries to accept a political

paradox: on the one hand to call for the overthrow of capital and on the other to promote the moral degradations of capitalism. The very idea that capitalism was in any sense progressive seems to fly in the face of the reality of the brutal class reality of the system. How is it possible to describe the capitalist mode of production as progressive when, for example, it plunges both Indian and British weavers into penury, which ruthlessly exploits child labour and which in the middle of the Nineteenth Century condemned hundreds of thousands of urban workers to disease and early death? As I noted above the progressive nature of a system is defined by its socialisation of the labour process and the development of larger productive forces. This happened despite, or rather because of its ruthless exploitation. As Marx put it:

" More than any other mode of production, it (capitalism) squandered human lives, or living bread, and not only blood and flesh, but also nerve and brain." (Capital Vol. 3)

But if this is the case does it not follow that in the progressive epoch of its development revolutionaries were bound to support the system and all its horrors? If one wills the end then surely one must will the means? Yes, but let's be clear about what this means. The end that revolutionaries desire is that of communism and the means to achieve this is the revolutionary working class. In other words, our concern is not with the development of capitalism per se but with the development and extension of a proletarian movement. The capitalist system develops as a result of its own exploitative and competitive logic. It is a system which is characterised by the inability of its bourgeois agents to penetrate its historical realities. This contrasts with the proletarian movement which, whilst it is an unintended consequence of the system, is constituted by its revolutionary consciousness. It follows from this that Nineteenth Century communists were not duty bound to support the ruthless exploitation of child labour in the textile industry despite the fact that this was a factor in the accumulation of capital. Rather it was to be there with the working class, to expose not only the specific inhumanities of the system but also the class goals which confront workers. In the concrete this meant building up the combativity of the working class, encouraging it to form trade unions and political parties. When Marx came out against the slave owning Confederate States in the Civil War he gave as his reasons:

" every independent movement of the workers was paralysed so long as society disfigured part of the Republic. Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded."

This is not a defence of capitalist wage labour over that of slave labour but rather an allying with the working class in the struggle against capitalism. Thus the dialectic of revolutionary commitment proceeds and thus the paradox is resolved: in supporting a necessary component of capitalism (the working class) communists ally themselves with the defeat of that society.(4)

It should be noted that the move from the realm of "necessity" (class society) to that of "freedom" (communism) is not guaranteed. Although the language of Marx's progressive philosophy speaks of

inevitability and necessity it does not follow that the working class will in some pre-ordained manner achieve its historical goal. When Marx examined the struggles of 1848 he showed that he was aware of the extent to which historical circumstances delineated historical possibility. Marx concluded that given the relatively low level of development of French capitalism its working class was unable to attain the consciousness necessary to frontally assault capital with its revolutionary alternative. The working class, he wrote:

" makes no theoretical inquiries into its own task. The French working class had not attained this level; it was still incapable of accomplishing its own revolution."

(The Class Struggles in France)



#### DECADENCE AFTER MARX

Marx mapped the way forward. He lived and died in the period of capital's ascendancy, the time when it spread its tentacles to all parts of the globe and subjugated tens of millions of people. It was left to other revolutionaries to take up the tasks of describing and analysing the bourgeoisie's historical bankruptcy. A leading figure in this was Rosa Luxemburg.

Luxemburg, as early as 1898, a mere fifteen years after the death of Marx, discerned the real decay of the capitalist mode of production. In the anti-Bernstein text, known as *Reform or Revolution*, she pinpointed the conditions which indicated that the system was entering the era of historic crisis. In contesting Bernstein's view that capitalism was no longer subject to crisis Luxemburg was forced to look at the manifestations of capitalism in decline. Foremost amongst the indicators of this crisis was the emergence of imperialism, that is, the situation where national capitals fought both militarily and economically for given markets. For her the shrinking of available markets, the cartelisation of capital and the overall sharpening of international competition pointed to the decline:

" When capitalist development has reached a certain level, the interests of the bourgeoisie, as a class, and the needs of economic

progress begin to clash even in the capitalist sense. We believe that this phase has already begun. It shows itself in two extremely important phenomena of contemporary social life: on the one hand the policy of tariff barriers, and on the other militarism."

Luxemburg believed that these conditions of decline "in the last analysis aggravates the anarchy of the capitalist world and expresses and ripens the internal contradictions." Luxemburg devoted a great deal of effort to analysing the specific nature of the historical-economic crisis of capitalism. Simply stated, she came to the conclusion that the fatal flaw in the capitalist system was its need for a market which was external to the capitalist mode of production. Given the finite nature of the global economy and the all-embracing need of capital to expand and extend capitalist relations inevitably a point is reached when markets are "saturated" and surplus value can no longer be realised:

"As it (capital) approaches the point where humanity only consists of capitalists and proletarians, further accumulation will become impossible."

(Anti-Critique)

Not surprisingly, in such a situation capitalism is torn by crisis as it fights over shrinking third markets. This leads to the point where:

"raids turn into a chain of economic and political catastrophes: world crises, wars, revolution."

(Anti-Critique)

And this Imperialism was explicable and signified:

"the last chapter of its (capital) historic process of expansion: it is in the period of universally sharpened world competition between the capitalist states for the remaining non-capitalist areas on the earth."

(Anti-Critique)

Events validated Luxemburg's views. She saw the "Mass Strike" of 1905 as a sign of the historical maturity of the working class. She recognised that in the Russian proletariat's fight were the seeds of political emancipation insofar as a new way of organising political power was born. The construction of Soviets by the working class showed that there was an organisational and fighting form appropriate to the era of communist revolution. As the intensity of imperialist struggles grew so the threat of "World War" presented itself. When this broke out in 1914 it confirmed Luxemburg in her belief that the corruption of the system was there for all to see. Writing from prison in Germany and driven by her hatred of the system she described it as:

"Shamed, dishonoured, wading in blood and dripping with filth, thus capitalist society stands. Not as we usually see it, playing the roles of peace and righteous-

ness, of order, of philosophy, of ethics - but as a roaring beast, as an orgy of anarchy, as a pestilential breath, devastating culture and humanity - so it appears in all its hideous nakedness."

(Junius Pamphlet)

The "beast" had killed before 1914 but the scope of its killing and the social-economic conjuncture was such that it signified that murder was all it was henceforth capable of. The necessity of socialism cried out:

"Our necessity receives its justification with the moment when the capitalist class ceases to be the bearer of historic progress, when it becomes a hindrance, a danger, to the future development of society. That capitalism has reached this stage at the present, world war has revealed."

(Junius Pamphlet)

Rosa Luxemburg was not the only one to view the movement of capital, the emergence of Imperialism as an indication of the growing senility of capitalism. Nikolai Bukharin, starting from a different detailed economic analysis, came to a similar conclusion. For Bukharin Imperialism was predicted upon the creation of a world economy. Working within orthodox marxist notions of competition and the inherent tendency for the organic composition of capital to change in such a way as to tend to reduce the rate of profit he concluded that:

"as the growth of productive forces within 'national' economy, on a capitalist basis, brought about the formation of national cartels and trusts, so the growth of productive forces within world capitalism makes the formation of international agreements between the various national capitalist groups, from the most elemental forms to the centralised form of an international trust, even more urgent."

(Imperialism and World Economy)

This internationalisation of capital did not in any way abolish the anarchic nature of production. Indeed in the era of Imperialism Bukharin said war, which was an "immanent law" within capitalism, was one of the "methods of capitalist competition" and that this competition:

"leads to the greatest convulsions and catastrophes, to the greatest waste of human energy, and most forcefully raises the problem of establishing new forms of social life."

(Imperialism and World Economy)

Like Luxemburg Bukharin recognised that war was inevitable under decadent capitalism: with the emergence of intra-national competition tendencies could only heighten. He wrote:

"Competition reaches the highest, the last conceivable state of development. It is now the



competition of state capitalist trusts in the world market."<sup>(4)</sup>

It is significant that Luxemburg and Bukharin came to similar conclusions about the historical conjuncture. Despite very different detailed analyses of the dynamics of capitalist crisis they both agreed that there was no longer any justification for the continued existence of capitalism. The crisis and contradictions of the system had grown to the extent that no qualitative growth was henceforth possible: the world market had been created which in turn meant that capitalist production, whilst now incorporating 100% of the globe, had proceeded to the extent that that "co-operative" labour made global socialised production possible. Consequently, the global war first threatened and then practised by the bourgeoisie was in a sense 'parasitic' in that it was between existing economies and had nothing to do with establishing and extending capitalism. Only the bourgeoisie could gain from this situation. And it was a situation which was henceforward endemic. The outbreak of World War One signed the historic death knell of capitalism. In 1914 it did not suddenly become a decadent mode of production. Just as progress had been a process of development so also had been decadence, but much accelerated. Thus when Luxemburg analysed the struggle for dominance in Africa in the 1880s she saw that something was occurring which signified the emergence of a new period. The very rate at which the system fell towards global war was an indication of the forces of decadence at work, i.e. deepening and sharpening competition. This might be retarded by bourgeois economic or political mechanisms but it could not be stopped. The only thing which could stop it was the working class.

#### DECADENCE POST RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

When the forces of the Russian proletariat rallied against capital it looked as if the prognostications of Luxemburg and Bukharin were about to receive full validation - the decadent system, having engendered its own grave digger was about to be buried. In the event this did not happen. The working class was defeated and victorious capital tooled up for further wars.

But even the bourgeoisie recognised that with 1914-18 something had changed. Keynes wrote in 1919:

" England is in a state of transition, and her economic problems are serious. We may be on the eve of great changes in her social and industrial structure . . . The forces of the 19th Century have run their course and are exhausted. The economic motives and ideals of a generation no longer satisfy us: we must find a new way and must suffer again the malaise and finally the pangs of a new industrial birth."  
(Economic Consequences of the Peace)

He was correct, the 19th Century forms were done, a new way was needed. But rather than being an "industrial birth" the way was to put the beast on a life support system. That this has worked for seventy years does not invalidate the notion that capitalism is no longer decadent. We need only look at the structure of capitalism over the period to see that it is a system which can only supply misery.<sup>(5)</sup>

This is not to deny that the use values of capitalism have developed in seventy years or that commodity production has remained static. Far from it. Decadence is not defined by static or declining levels of production. The decadence of the system is established by the way in which the horrors it imposes upon mankind are capable of transcendence with the historically given levels of social productive capacity. Thus the imperialist conflagration, the recurring economic crises, the "natural" disasters which continue to ravage the world can be overcome, at least the objective conditions exist. (The problem of actual transcendence through revolutionary subjectivity is another problem) This is the essence of decadence.

#### POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Beyond this decadence carries with it structural-political changes which impinge upon the organisation of revolutionary activity. Rosa Luxemburg was one of the first to become aware of the political implications of decadence.<sup>(6)</sup> Luxemburg recognised that in the new period liberal democracy was indefensible for the reason that the institutions of capitalism were inevitably associated with the needs of imperialism, as a consequence parliamentary bodies could only negotiate within the parameters of the needs of decadence and be part of the struggle between national capitals. Luxemburg wrote that these institutions had "completely exhausted their function as aids in the development of bourgeois society." Flowing from this same analysis she also



concluded that in the era of internationalisation of the capitalist market, struggles for national autonomy were meaningless for the very reason that imperialism tended to the situation where a few capitals were dominant and the rest became client-subject states:

" So long as capitalist states exist i.e. so long as imperialist world policies determine and regulate the inner and the outer life of the nation, there can be no "national self-determination" either in war or in peace."  
(Reform or Revolution)



And elsewhere she continued:

"Today the nation is but a cloak that covers the imperialistic desires, a battle-cry for imperialistic rivalries. The last ideological measure with which the masses can be persuaded to play the role of cannon fodder in imperialistic wars."

(Junius)

National Liberation struggles are only moments in larger imperialist struggles. Consequently there is now no way that such struggles can be supported by revolutionaries. Luxemburg's analysis on this was inclusive but nonetheless was rejected by many the revolutionaries who could not break from the opportunism so characteristic of the Second International.

It has been no easy matter for revolutionaries to defend these positions. On the one hand the "traditional" bourgeoisie has directly organised itself both ideologically and via its state organs of repression to ensure that the working class pays no heed to the lessons of decadence; but far more important, and more tragic, has been the opposition engendered within the proletarian movement itself. Foremost in this attack upon revolutionary clarity was Lenin in his infamous pamphlet "Left-Wing Communism as an Infantile Disorder". This work marks one of the lowest points in Lenin's revolutionary life and it and its consequences validate the positions of Luxemburg et alia. As a result of Lenin's temporising and his seeking to accommodate weaknesses within the Russian situation he effectively aided the bourgeoisie both at the time and subsequently. He armed the left of the bourgeoisie with an ideological structure which guided the class into supporting imperialist struggles.

But revolutionaries were not defeated. Through the 1920s and 1930s they continued to extend the political legacy of Luxemburg and others. The so-called Dutch, German and Italian Left Communists took up these tasks and developed a critique of the whole panoply of Social Democratic forces which were hostile to proletarian struggle. They highlighted the bourgeois components of these movements and argued for the importance of self-activity and consciousness in the working class.

Social Democracy was an outgrowth of working class activity. It represented a valid working class response in the era of progressive growth. Decadence changed this. Essentially Social Democracy, typified in Trade Union struggle, was founded upon the possibility of immediate reform of capitalism and the objective impossibility during that period of the working class imposing its historic solution of socialism upon capitalism. Class pressure could, and still does, influence and ameliorate some of the worst aspects of bourgeois society. The working class is a factor in determining the intensity and direction of exploitation. So if this remains true today as it was in the past, why is it no longer possible to support reformism?

In the Nineteenth Century revolutionaries could work within organisations with the "minimum" programme but at the same time advocate the fight for the "maximum". Today this is no longer possible. We live in a different historical conjuncture, that of decadence. As already noted the period of progressive growth was typified by

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the quantitative and qualitative expansion of the bourgeois mode of production. This entailed generating a "cooperative" global economy which provided the objective base for socialism.

In the era of progressive growth capitalist competition was generally typified by competition between individual units both within and among national boundaries. - The Imperatives of Imperialism demanded new things of national capitals and institutions within them. Imperialism, as Bukharin and Luxemburg had perceived, was characterised by the emergence of the nation state as a constantly active agent in promoting its particular interests to the detriment of others leading to some form of coordinated economic competition reinforced by military might. This change had a profound impact upon reformism. Reformism, Social Democracy, was caught, trapped by its own premises and forced to become an agent of imperialist capitalism. Central to reformism is the necessity to accept compromise within the strictures of given moments of bourgeois production i.e. to accept a *modus vivendi* with capitalism. But in accepting this working relationship reformist organisations necessarily fall into negotiating with the needs of imperialism for, in the final analysis, decadent capitalism is organised by the state for the needs of the imperialist state. Thus reformism becomes not only implicated in imperialism it becomes and remains central to defending decadent capitalism.

No clearer example of this is to be found than when a national capital is confronted by external economic-military threats. The carnage of WW1 and WW2 was in part ensured by the direct participation of trade unions and the rest of Social Democracy. What the Webbs called "the impulsive and unself-regarding patriotism" of the trade unions in 1914 was no accident. It was the logical product of a programme of political action which accepted that the health and welfare of trade unionism was intimately related to the well-being of the national capital. When war broke out Social Democracy rallied to the flag. This took some revolutionaries by surprise but with varying degrees of clarity a number of individuals and groups began to see that reformism was henceforth an unacceptable companion in political action. Writing in 1915 Herman Gorter noted that for trade unionism:

"reform became everything. An improved standard of living the goal. Theory, the revolutionary theory went by the board. And with it the entire international. Such things became just noise and hollow words."

(The Origins of Nationalism in the Proletariat).

And flowing from this commitment the goal of the "nation" was taken as the goal of the working class

"Reform, the path to the goal is everything. Unite with the bourgeoisie too, with a section of it, then you too will obtain many more reforms."

In a similar vein Anton Pannekoek said that in decadence the trade union becomes:

"legal, an open supporter of the state and recognised by the latter, it makes 'expansion of the economy before the revolution' its

slogan, in other words the maintenance of capitalism." (World Revolution and Communist Tactics)

Since WWI reformism has shown itself to be more than a willing friend of capital: an element of capitalism. At times trade unions are part of the formal state machine, at others they stand in opposition. Irrespective, however, of these apparently contradictory positions, the reality is that at all times they remain part of the imperialist structure, defending a particular programme which, even when it is not accepted by another section of the struggle, defends a very particular interest within a decadent structure.

At another level reformism in decadence is the antithesis of working class activity. By definition reformism demands that workers accept not only a political programme and the constraints of imperialism but also the organisational form which opposes and obstructs the development of self-consciousness in the working class. Pannekoek was clear in 1920 when he wrote that the trade union in decadence:

" democratic forms notwithstanding, the will of the members is unable to prevail against the bureaucracy; every revolt breaks on the carefully constructed apparatus of orders of business and statistics before it can shake the hierarchy."

(World Revolution)

Whilst some of Pannekoek's formulations on this aspect of reformism tends to make too much of a distinction between political programme and organisation, he was nonetheless correct in his claim that the reformist struggle, whether in Parliament or trade unions, was part of a form wholly antithetical to the course of the working class in the era of imperialism. The era of imperialism is the era of revolution and the only form of proletarian organisation is that which promotes the development of class consciousness. This is only possible in the self-activity of the class. Revolutionary self-consciousness comes from direct and immediate participation in class struggle. To date the historically discovered forms of struggle which expresses this need are the Councils and Soviets. In them consciousness has the greatest opportunity for developing. Pannekoek said of their need that:

" Revolution requires social reconstruction to be undertaken, difficult decisions made, the whole proletariat in creative action - and this is possible if first the proletariat then a greater and greater number take matters in hand themselves, know their own responsibilities, investigate, agitate, wrestle, strive, reflect, assess, seize chances and act upon them."

(World Revolution)

It's true that in the era of progressive capitalism the most dynamic moments of class struggle involved this self-activity and that this inevitably came up against the limits of reformism. There was certainly tension and conflict at these points and it was the duty of revolutionaries to agitate for active participation in struggles. This tension, whilst it could not be resolved, could be mitigated by the larger political-historical realities of the

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period i.e. the context of developing capitalism. In decadence this uneasy relationship was finally broken, resolved. It is no longer possible to advocate active participation in organisational-political forms which are not those of the self-conscious proletariat.

#### STATE CAPITALISM -

One of the features which highlights reformism's assimilation into the capitalist structure is the extent to which it is found in formal state structures. As already noted, in WWI both German and British Social Democracy found their places in the sun, they were legitimated in the state structure. Subsequently their positions have ebbed and flowed with the shifting alliances and strategies of bourgeois factions within national capitals. For example German reformism was expelled from the state in 1933. After the heady days of Weimar, when it helped slaughter thousands of workers, reformism was put into opposition. More recently, and in a much less dramatic fashion, we have witnessed British Trade Unionism being pushed out into the cold by Thatcherism. Over the past ten years the Tory government has significantly eroded the effective strength of trade unionism and at the same time has reorganised the economic structure to the extent that it can now appear as if the "classic" form of decadence has been swept away. Thatcherism has not only marginalised the unions, it has also systematically de-nationalised important sectors of the economy. In doing this it seems as if that saviour of capitalism, nationalisation, that apparently essential form of decadence so typically promulgated by social democracy, is historically dead. Now this faces revolutionaries with a problem, especially those who tend towards the view that the degree of nationalisation in an economy is in direct proportion to the extent of state capitalism. One organisation which appears to hold this view is the Communist Workers Organisation. Thatcherism has forced the CWO towards rejecting the classic left communist position on decadence, imperialism and its formal structure commonly accepted to be state capitalism.



In *Workers Voice* 35, (June/July 1987) the CWO published an article entitled "Theses on Thatcherism". This "focus for discussion" was to be a guide for a "fuller understanding of the evolution of British capitalism in the 1980s, and its likely development into the 1990s". The CWO is an organisation which claims to stand by the idea that we live in the era of Imperialism and that this is synonymous with the decadence of capital. Starting from such a position one could expect the CWO to be sharper on the nature of Thatcherism than it is. Indeed one would expect at least an attempt to apply the "classical" notion of decadence to the shifting complexities of the past ten years. Unfortunately rather than taking up the challenge the CWO has panicked. Like *Solidarity* over twenty years earlier the CWO has taken a short-term movement in capital as some sort of general refutation of the revolutionary position. Just as *Solidarity's* nerve failed with marxism in the context of Keynesianism in the period of reconstruction so also has the CWO's in the face of Thatcherism. This is not only a weakness of that particular organisation but one which threatens to undermine hard fought for gains of the past sixty years.

The basic argument behind "Theses on Thatcherism" is that the Thatcher government has taken a decision to cast off industrial production from its central concerns and to focus upon extending the service sector of the economy. This move, it is claimed, entailed the "reversal of the trend towards state capitalism" signifying that British capitalism has given up any "attempt to maintain its position on the world market as a specific national capital". Underpinning these conclusions are the beliefs that state capitalism is an organisational form of specific capitals rather than a general historical condition; and that gradations of strength within the world market are simply defined: those with what might be called "economic independence" are national capitals and those without are not (it seems a corollary of this is that the former are imperialist whilst the latter are not). Clearly, these positions go against the received notion that capitalist forms in decadence are not chosen or rejected at will by bourgeois governments but are forced upon them by large historical forces (always acknowledging that there are moments of contingency within general structures).

So what is state capitalism? It is the condition of capital in the era of imperialism; it is the necessary way in which capital organises itself in decadence; it is a form which expresses the way in which the economic and political imperatives of decadence play upon capitalism.

It is not nationalisation. If it were then Russia (to date) would be more state capitalist than France whilst the U.S.A. would hardly be state capitalist at all. In other words the most powerful nation in the world manifests least the phenomenon of decadence. Undoubtedly nationalisation is a factor in state capitalism as is was the related policy of Keynesianism. It was no accident that Keynes developed his particular theory in the wake of proletarian revolution, global war and extending economic crisis. He was one of the sharpest bourgeois minds of the period aware as he was of the threat from the working class and the crisis nature of capitalism when left on its "natural" path. Keynes' solution was economic and political. He called on governments to institute a policy of demand management which on the one hand would alter the so-called natural equilibrium of capital and thus overcome the

tendency to unemployment; on the other this would have the political consequence of managing the problem of the working class. Not surprisingly various bourgeoisies began to apply Keynesian policies in the 1930s. It was possible to use Keynesianism in both a nationalised and private mode. In Britain the Labour Party seized upon Keynes' ideas to justify "Clause Four" showing how "socialism" accorded with economic "common sense" and that it was natural for the state to not only guide the economy but indeed to nationalise it all the better to control and direct investment. In contrast with the way in which Keynesian policies involved extensive nationalisation in Britain is the example of the U.S.A. Roosevelt's New Deal was Keynesianism applied on a large scale. Demand management was successfully pursued without extensive nationalisation, indeed without any significant ideology of taking over the "commanding heights".

Keynesianism was a product of decadent capitalism; it was not decadence itself. For a moment it best expressed the ideological and political needs of state capitalism. The fact that it and its nationalised face was such a prominent feature of western capitalism for over forty years tended to lead revolutionaries into the trap of believing that these two elements were the essence of state capitalism. But they were not and are not.

The same can be said of the staffed nature of Russian capitalism. This was the product of the defeat of the proletariat, the existence of a once revolutionary party at the head of the state and all this in the context of imperialism. The private bourgeoisie had been expelled from Russia and the logical organisational form which flowed from the socialist ideology of the Bolsheviks was that of staffification. Similarly the staffed way in which Third World countries have developed is explicable in terms of particular constituents and the general historical pressures.

The essence of state capitalism is found in the way the world economy has been parcelled among a few major capitalist powers which forces the state to intervene and direct economic and social life. As already noted imperialism was in part constituted by the growth of monopolies within national capitals and these were buttressed by the development of state organs appropriate to confronting the increasing competition. At the very heart of these state organs were armed forces. As decadence deepened the need for states to maintain, or at least attempt to maintain, military superiority grew. Generally military expenditure has tended to grow as a percentage of the G.N.P. of all bourgeois states. For example between 1913 and 1969 the proportion of G.N.P. devoted to arms by British capital almost doubled. The situation of that of the U.S.A. was more dramatic. In the space of just over thirty years (1939-69) it grew by a factor of six. In decadence the capitalist state has become a major customer, a consumer of weaponry. This in itself is a sign of the bankruptcy of the system: the world economy shows less and less ability to produce items with human use-value, increasingly weapons of destruction take centre stage. Military spending is necessary for capital because at the end of the day imperialism satisfies itself in open warfare. Expenditure on arms is now inextricably part of the global economy, and these, as is all too obvious, are willingly used by the bourgeoisie to slaughter millions. For some nation states arms production can be highly profitable but globally it is a drain as it adds no new value to capital, it does not lead to expanded reproduction. This again is a sign of capital's decadence.

Dominance can be achieved by military might. Imperialism is a system of relations of dominance. This is not fixed for all time. Since the end of the First World War the hierarchy of the global economy has changed with the U.S.A. rising to the top and a variety of changes occurring through the lower ranks. However, irrespective of these changes, the basic character of imperialism remains the same. The CWO's belief that only the dominant economies are national capitals and by extension the view that only they are Imperialist is refuted by the realities of the world. Firstly at what point of domination do we stop at? Given for example, the fact that over the past fifty years, US capitalism has been the major force in the world market, more powerful than the other western nations and also stronger than Russia, does this mean that only the U.S.A. is a national capital, only it is Imperialist? Take another historical example, that of Britain. It was one of the victors of 1918 but far from this re-establishing British capital at the top of the capitalist tree the indebtedness brought on by the war pushed it towards becoming a client state of the U.S.A. But this did not mean it ceased either to strive for and on occasions achieve moments of dominance in the world market. British capitalism was fortunate to have the Empire which it forced itself upon. This undoubtedly gave British capital a breathing space and was undoubtedly Imperialist but it's relative decline continued. The world market is made up of such levels of dominance. Big fleas, little fleas, but nevertheless all fleas and all pursuing their Imperialist ends within a state capitalist framework.

If we once again take the example of the interwar period and the position of British capital we find features which typify how state capitalism functions and this in the context of a non-nationalised economy. The Exchange Equalisation Fund was set up in 1932 with the aim of controlling the value of sterling on the world market, helping to set up a "sterling bloc". This was a long way from Britain of the Gold standard and free-trading. The pressures of economic crisis and intensified economic competition forced the state to take over the management of currency in international competition (as far as was possible for in bourgeois economic relations total control is not possible). A further weapon in the state's armoury was the use of tariff policies which could, at least momentarily, protect sectors of the British economy. In agriculture and fisheries marketing boards were set up to control and direct local production as well as restrict imports. This of course was not the first time that the British state had controlled such imports (the Corn Laws being one of the better known examples of earlier restrictions) but it is in the context of the control which gives it meaning and in the situation of decadence tariff control expresses state capitalist imperatives. The same can be said for the direct state intervention in industry. The recent controlled "restructuring" in mining and steel manufacture is nothing new. Similar policies were instituted in the 1930s. Not only did the British state restrict imports of industrial products it went so far as to encourage the British Iron and Steel confederation to push through a nationalisation of steel making. Companies were amalgamated and works were closed down and at the same time capital was concentrated into developing better integrated steel plants with the capacity to compete on the world market. The shipbuilding industry also underwent a policy of outback and closing down under the immediate direction of the National Shipbuilders Security (a cartel of private

capitalists) but with the approval of the state. By the mid 1930s the state decided that it was strategically important to begin subsidising shipbuilding. A similar pattern was to be found in the coal industry. In this instance coal owners showed great reluctance to reorganise themselves (a legacy of the particulars of British Economic development). Voluntary schemes instituted by the state were rejected or ignored by the owners and in 1938, in the face of opposition from private capital, a bill was introduced to Parliament which would have forced reorganisation upon the industry. Of course all this was being done in the light of Keynes General Theory (1936), a work which guided not only forms of industrial reorganisation but also social intervention. Schemes for control of the unemployed were instituted; Distressed Areas policy was pursued. Control of the unemployed was carried out before Keynes major work but his General Theory focussed upon the causes (as the bourgeois economist saw them) of "distress" in the economy and thus became an important factor in constructing an ideology for policing the working class, for of course, global policing was via the military. Rearmament was undertaken by the state from the mid 1930s.



Keynes in 1929

These policies of the inter-war years were state capitalist although they involved little nationalisation. State control was via currency manipulation, tariff agreements, direction of industrial capital, policing the civil population and military might. And all this within a world of shifting national hierarchies. Individually such policies were not unique but taken as general ongoing strategies the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The application of particular strategies by the state is dependant upon circumstances, but whatever these happen to be we find that the state does not withdraw from its overall control of economy and population, nor does it stand aside from international competition, military and economic. The CWO's belief that Thatcherism represents such moves away from state capitalism is born of their constricted notion of what constitutes state capitalism and the meaning of Thatcherism.



In *Theses on Thatcherism* the empirical detail is accurate enough in describing what Thatcher's government has done. As the CWO notes in the past ten years we have seen a concerted effort to rationalise parts of the economic structure to the point where they have all but disappeared; shipbuilding, steel and coal being the main victims of this policy. At the same time Thatcherism marked a break with the so-called "full employment" consensus underpinned by Keynesianism as well as a deliberate policy cutting the trades unions from formal state structures.

The general approach of the Thatcherite right grew from the failure of governments in the 1970s to solve the problems of rising inflation and extending unemployment, both indicators of the general crisis of capitalism and the particular decline of Britain. Heath's government had shown itself unable to solve these problems and had been defeated by class action. This was the breeding ground for the new right. Keynesianism had run its course, it was unable to cope with the accretions of deficit financing manifesting itself as "stagflation" i.e. declining profitability coupled with inflation. The new right was not alone nor the first to see the need for an alternative framework. Callaghan heralded the way forward in 1976:

"The cosy world we were told would go on forever, where full employment would be guaranteed by a stroke of the Chancellor's pen, cutting taxes, deficit spending, that cosy world is gone."

Keith Joseph led the formation of the new right within the Heathite Tory Party, his Centre for Policy Studies becoming a focal point for an alternative economic strategy. On the face of it the new strategies were akin to the liberalism of the 19th Century with an emphasis on allowing the market to follow its "natural" course. It was argued, should withdraw from its interventionary role. Friedman, Sherman et alia supplied monetarist theory whilst Hayek's individualist philosophy gave partial legitimacy to the Thatcherite school. (very much a pot pourri of ideologies) To the new right not only was nationalisation anathema so also was the participation of trades unions in government. In asserting this Thatcherism broke from the tripartism of the previous forty years. Part of the legacy of the British Keynesianism was acceptance of a direct role for unions in the state. After 1979 this was changed. A central plank of Thatcher's electoral programme and subsequent policy was to "curb the power of the unions". We well know that in essence this meant attacking the working class not because the unions represent workers interests but because sections of the bourgeoisie are not at all clear on the class nature of trade unionism. But it is also more than this. For Thatcherism is a break with the gradualism of the post-war consensus. Deepening crisis engendered the new response. Trade Unions, Social Democracy and a significant sector of the Tory Party were implicated in the policy of demand management and nationalisation. Thatcher and her henchmen took the decision that a new way was required.

The "traditional" industries which had been nationalised were to be "rationalised" and sold off. This conflicted with the political programme of Social Democracy, Labour Party and trade union self-interest was to a great extent rooted in these

areas. Consequently, in the eyes of the new right trade unions as well as the working class were a barrier to the reorganisation of the British economy. Quite correctly Thatcherism plighted the steel, the coal and shipbuilding industries as being uncompetitive on the world market, not to mention the fact that some of the most militant sections of the working class were to be found in them. Previous to 1979 the bourgeoisie had not shown itself unable nor unwilling to cut back these enterprises, increase rates of exploitation and attack the working class. But what they had been unwilling to contemplate was reducing these industries to an industrial slump. Thatcherism was not so reluctant. Hence the opposition within reformism of the left. Hence the direct attacks upon trade unions as distinct from the working class (of course there is the ideological counterpart to these industrial strategies, namely asserting the sole reality of the individual and denying collectivity etc.)

The decision to confront these industrial drains was dependant upon these conditions. The overarching one was that of the crisis and Britain's declining position; this decline was specifically situated in the Western Bloc and within the European Community; and the third condition was a philosophy of what constituted the best way forward for British Capitalism. As regards the first condition, that of the crisis, this underpinned the electoral success of the Tories in 1979. Specifically the position within the Western Bloc and Europe gave Thatcher the strategy of abandoning centrality to industries which, irrespective of them being a drain on national profitability, had been previously considered to be strategically so important. Behind the reduction of these industries to slump status lies the partially unstated acceptance of a division of labour within the Community and the Bloc. Steel coal and shipbuilding were, in the eyes of the Tories of the new right, beyond redemption. They were not only tainted by old Keynesian politics, they were in such a poor condition that there was no prospect of them becoming serious economic competitors on the world market. Consequently, they were to be cut back (also happening in the rest of the European Community). This would not only undermine the militant base for working class activity it would also fit nicely into the "market" oriented philosophy of Thatcherism. The industrial slump could thus be set up for denationalisation: a troublesome working class would, it was hoped, be pacified; the industry would be so concentrated that profitability could be achieved. The combination of these factors would make these industries acceptable investments to private capital. Not only this, by increasing rates of exploitation of the working class, by privatising them this Tory government has helped plug a major hole in British capitalist profitability. As yet, of course, it leaves unanswered the questions of the strategic strength or weakness of this policy. But what is answered are those who might question the reality of the Western Bloc. By accepting the non-viability of these industries in Britain Thatcherism acknowledges that the possibility of military conflict is nil within the west and that there is no possibility of the bourgeoisie here being "held to ransom" by those who have stronger steel etc. industries. (Coal is partially nullified by the state's nuclear programme). In this scenario the bloc is here to stay and as a result of national bourgeoisies should accept defeat in certain areas and concentrate on those which are shown to be most



successful for them.

Thatcherism has not yet given up Britain's role as a national capital as the CWO would have us believe. It has replanted it. The "tertiarisation" it sees occurring is an acceptance by the Tory government that British national capital can best compete by strengthening financial and city institutions and by drawing overseas investment into the economy plus any crumbs that might be had from tourism.

Nor is Britain moving away from state capitalism. The state today is as central to economic and social organisation as it was pre-1979. Indeed the control it has over civil society is now at a higher level than it has been since the last World War. Privatisation continues apace. This is not only an ideological imperative, it is one which pays off for capital. At the small level it gives the present government a "cash-flow" to finance tax cuts and help keep a declining exchequer afloat. But at the larger level the policy adopted by Thatcherism has "renewed" industrial structure. This is a state policy, whether in the long term it is better than extending nationalisation is a question separate from that of state capitalism. Even with the large scale privatisation being pursued we have not witnessed the state withdrawing from overall economic control. Despite the free-market rhetoric the Manchester school is not alive and well and living in 10 Downing Street. Thatcher is not Cobden and Joseph is not Ricardo. The state continues to guide and direct the economy. Because it has chosen a new industrial-financial strategy it has required new techniques or rather greater emphasis on old ones. Control of interest rates, for example, has been central to Thatcher's policies; tightening state spending, public borrowing and using taxation to cut public spending is not a withdrawal of the state from controlling social-economic life, it is to continue it by marginalising sections of the population and using the "market" lie to control them. At another level the state has centralised control by undercutting the power of local councils, by "tightening purse strings". This had both ideological and economic impact and illustrates a possible strategy of control available to state capitalism (cf. France where at the same time local government was being decentralised, would the CWO see anti state capitalist forces at work here?) The deep recession of the years of immediate victory after 1979 was state organised.

At the same time the state has also continued to extend the organs of social control. Whilst it is possible that a Social Democratic government might not have extended the "secret police" apparatus as far as the Tory right it is certainly true that it would not have dismantled it. This apparatus has assumed greater and greater importance for over seventy years. The onset of decadence, the revolutionary nature of class struggle in 1917, the impact of war forced bourgeoisies to develop or extend organs of internal repression. Thatcherism recognises as well as an bourgeois faction the necessity for these. State capitalism means not only organising economic interests in the world market, it also requires supervision and control of hostile internal elements, particularly a militant working class. And there is of course the military wing of capitalism.

There has been no decline in the state capitalist content in British national capital, a change in emphasis, yes, and perhaps a significant decline in

39.

its position in the hierarchy of capitals. But as has been said the flea, irrespective of its size, remains a flea.

#### Conclusions

This excursion into the question of state capitalism in Britain is not arcane. It is one which helps focus the way in which we see decadence. How we appraise the present policies of Thatcherism and question the extent to which they signify a successful assault upon the economic crisis lies into not only our detailed economic analyses but the overarching ideas of whether social systems progress and decline. There is at least one member of the CWO who does appear to be questioning the "meta-historical" significance of the bedrock of the Left Communist theory of capitalism's decadence. We would ask the comrades of the CWO and all others who are moving towards rejecting it (or who don't accept it) to stop and ask themselves what becomes of major planks of our political programme if this step is taken: where does it leave you with the problems of national liberation, reformism and world revolution? When Marx, Luxemburg, Bukharin et al. perceived the fall of capital in the mechanics of its structure they showed that deterioration of the system could be guided and informed by a historical materialism; this might not allow one the short-term possibility of achieving the goal of communism but it demonstrated that it was a real historical possibility and that this could be brought nearer by adopting strategies consistent with this materialism. The system is decadent. But it will not vanish of its own accord. Only conscious class activity will destroy it, activity which can only come from recognising the traps set by a decaying system.

These traps are:

- (1) the historical redundancy of democratic parliamentary institutions which can now only express the imperatives of decadence, the need to tie the working class to national-imperialist policies;
- (2) the lie that the working class can gain anything from participating in trade union activity, permanently constituted organs of economic struggle inevitably become agents of capitalism;
- (3) just as the economic organs of reformism have been transformed into anti-working class institutions so the same is true of their political expressions, social democracy (in all its guises) is now merely one voice in the cacophony of decadence. The slogan calls of reformism are probably the biggest trap facing the working class;
- (4) with the emergence of decadence and the shifting division of the global markets among a few major powers so the possibility of meaningful national liberation was lost; irrespective of the extent of radical rhetoric of national struggles - against U.S. imperialism etc. - they cannot furnish the working class with a platform for its political programme;
- (5) flowing from all these political positions is the necessity for the proletariat and its political expressions to avoid the organisational traps of decadent forces. The way forward for the working class can only be in historically specific organs which to date are soviets. Only through these can the degradations of the decadent system be overcome. (7)

**Flett**

Notes on Page 28.

## REVIEW

" The recent history of the working class since 1918 has been a record of steady misfortune from the time of the 1921 lockout ... Very many comrades have lost heart in the losing fight and have fallen out of the struggle. The high hopes of 1918 have vanished and now the lament is "not in our day; we will not see the Revolution; perhaps in fifty years time"."

(quoted in Shipway p.126)

So wrote a British revolutionary in 1923 in a sober assessment of the balance of class forces. The working class in Britain, as elsewhere, had been defeated; the prospect of revolution replaced by the prospect of a half century of gloomy counter revolution. The prognosis was to prove all too accurate, and as a result the British revolutionary movement dwindled to a small band of militants gallantly defending their politics in the desperate climate of the 1930s, 40s and 50s.

### ANTI-PARLIAMENTARY COMMUNIST



THE MOVEMENT FOR  
WORKERS' COUNCILS  
IN BRITAIN, 1917-45

MARK SHIPWAY

Today their work is all but forgotten, only accessible in dusty archives or university microfilm libraries. Therefore today's generation of revolutionaries will unreservedly welcome the publication by Macmillan Press of Mark Shipway's important book *Anti-Parliamentary Communism, the movement for workers' councils in Britain 1917-45*. Unfortunately the exorbitant price tag, (£29.90 for a mere 205 pages) will put the volume beyond the reach of many militants, although you may be able to request it at your local library - better hurry before the next round of austerity measures wipes out this service!

In a clear and sympathetic manner Shipway documents the politics of the anti-parliamentary movement in Britain and chronicles their struggle in the inter-war years, a period of state repression, massive defeat and shattering of dreams.

The book is divided into three parts: *Basic Principles 1917-24; Continuity and Change 1925-35; Capitalist War and Class War 1936-45*. Part one, dealing with what distinguished the politics of the movement and the impact upon it of the Russian revolution, is inevitably the most controversial section of the work. The emphasis is on the *Workers Dreadnought* group led by Sylvia Pankhurst and the *Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation* led by the dynamic Guy Aldred - surprisingly little attention is paid to the *Socialist Labour Party*, by far the largest of the anti-parliamentary groups in Britain.

Shipway demonstrates that the rejection of the Labour Party and parliamentary tactics came not from an abstract idealism but from the direct experience of working with the Labour Party at the local level and of witnessing the betrayal of Social democracy during the Great War. The book describes the convoluted discussions that led to the formation of the *Communist Party of Great Britain* in 1920, drawing a distinction between the two strands in the debate. Firstly there were those elements who had taken a militant anti-war stance, who saw social democracy as no longer appropriate, and who wanted the new party to fight for Soviet power - into this category come the SLP, the *Dreadnought Group*, the *South Wales Socialist Society* and the *Shop Stewards and Workers Control* movement. Secondly there were those groups who had not actively supported the war, but who remained within the framework of pre-war social democracy, who wanted mass organisations of the pre-war variety to reform capitalism, and who supported the October revolution with hesitation - into this category come the *British Socialist Party*, the left wing of the ILP and an assortment of individuals. It was this second category that was to form the bulk of the CPGB, while the majority of the former rightly remained aloof.

While Shipway is correct to point out the negative influence of Lenin and the Bolsheviks on the regroupment talks, we need to be clear that this influence changed over time and was closely bound up with the fate of the world revolution and the degeneration of the Bolshevik regime in Russia.

In the first phase of the unity talks the most militant groups in Britain were closest to unity. Lenin and the Comintern backed these groups, funded their work and relied on Pankhurst for information on the British situation. Pankhurst wrote to Lenin complaining that the ILP and BSP were too occupied with gaining electoral success, and that the SLP had lost the support of many workers as a result of its new policy of participating in elections. Lenin replied that in his opinion non-participation in elections was a mistake, but urged her to go ahead and create a united party. He asked the *Dreadnought* group, SLP and SWSS to delay fusion until they could bring in the BSP - at this time the emphasis was on a party that could unite all

the revolutionary elements in Britain, and yet by August 1920 the Comintern sanctioned the creation of a CPGB which consisted of the BSP and a few individuals. Similarly in a letter to Pankhurst in August 1919 Lenin wrote:

" There is no doubt that the Communist International and the Communist Parties of the various countries would be making an irreparable mistake if they rebuked those workers who stand for Soviet power but who are against participation in the parliamentary struggle."

(Lenin on Britain p.423)

But in his notorious 1920 book *Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder* he called for the four parties to unite in Britain on the basis of obligatory participation in Parliament. In his 1919 letter Lenin even envisaged the possibility of two Communist Parties in Britain (one anti-parliamentary, one pro-parliamentary) as a good step forward if unity proved impossible, but when Pankhurst took his advice and formed the anti-parliamentary Communist Party (British Section of the Third International) in June 1920, Lenin radiated his disapproval of their action.

We are clearly dealing with an important shift in Lenin's position. With the revolution surging forward on all fronts the emphasis was on the unity of all revolutionaries, support for the most militant parties and a relegation of secondary issues to the background. But as the prospect of a world revolution diminished the attitude of the Comintern leaders changed. Theorising their own isolation, the Bolsheviks began to explain the failure of the revolution to spread by the unreadiness of European workers - they began to argue that the workers were still tied to Social Democracy and had to be won over as part of a longer term perspective; the struggle against social democracy was steadily abandoned, criticism was toned down and concessions were made. The Comintern had initially played an extremely positive role in the British unity talks, but as the isolation of the Russian Revolution continued it became increasingly negative.

By attempting to remain in power during a period of defeat the Bolsheviks found themselves building and defending State capitalism in Russia. The revolutionary movement in Britain had to find some explanation for the degeneration of the revolution they had previously so enthusiastically supported. Shipway identifies five explanations advanced in the pages of the *Dreadnought*:

1. That it was impossible trying to establish Socialism in a basically feudal society - the Bolsheviks found themselves initiating the era of capitalism.
2. The Russian peasantry were an anti-communist force. The Bolshevik support for individual rather than common ownership had led to reaction.
3. Russian industry was not controlled by the Soviets, making a successful revolution impossible.
4. Only the conscious participation of the whole working class would assure the success of the revolution - this was lacking in Russia.
5. The failure of the revolution to spread to the rest of Europe.

Shipway pours scorn on this attempt to explain the degeneration of the revolution in Russia, arguing that there had been no degeneration since there had been no proletarian revolution in the first place. The *CPGB* prefers the analysis, however limited and incomplete, of the Dreadnought group to the banal simplicities of today's council communists.

The formation of the CP(BSTI) in 1920 was arguably the highpoint of the anti-parliamentary movement in Britain. A combative organisation which had made a clean break with social democracy and was determined to fight for Soviet power. The party's secretary Edgar Whitehead declared its uncompromising attitude to Parliament to be:

" Parliament must be absolutely repudiated. A few soporific and trumpery palliatives are its highest possibilities. Parliament is a dangerous safety valve to dissipate the passion of the workers for social justice."

(Workers Dreadnought July 23 1920)

Another strength of the Dreadnought group was its determined internationalism, which contrasts sharply with the traditional parochialism of the workers movement in Britain. During the war they reported workers struggles abroad and published numerous anti-war texts by Lenin, Liebknecht and Gorter. In 1919 Pankhurst attended the Italian Socialist congress in Bologna and went on to contact revolutionaries in Switzerland, Holland and Germany. She was the first British revolutionary to establish links with the Bolshevik regime in Moscow and in 1919 became the British correspondent for *Communist International* and the Italian papers *Avanti!* and *Il Soviet*. She regularly corresponded with Clara Zetkin, Alexandra Kollontai and Gorter, and in 1920 she attended a meeting of the Communist International Sub Bureau in Amsterdam and the Second World Congress of the Comintern in Moscow. After her expulsion from the CPGB in 1921 Pankhurst maintained her international links and determined to fight alongside her fellow left communists in the formation of the fourth *Communist Workers International*. All this is in very sad contrast to the insular attitude of the SLP, APCF etc.

Shipway points out that the strength of the Dreadnought group was its energy and lively class instinct, its weakness being the flimsy theoretical foundation for much of its programme. This could lead to serious mistakes - such as the abortive attempt to create a British version of the *AMUD* long after the mass upsurge of the class had disappeared - and more seriously made it impossible for the group to survive once the revolutionary wave had been clearly defeated. It is easy to write this in 1989, but we must remember just how far the Dreadnought group travelled between 1917 and 1924; from a suffrage group affiliated to the Labour Party to a member of the Fourth Communist workers International alongside the *KAPD*. Theoretical clarification was understandably difficult during these explosive seven years, especially considering the extent of the group's interventionary work and the degree of state brutality suffered by Pankhurst and other militants. In seven years the group had to learn everything from scratch and simultaneously fight for the world revolution - just how much theoretical clarification has the modern revolutionary movement achieved in the past seven years?

In parts two and three of his book Shipway moves on to the period after the collapse of the Dreadnought

group in 1924, with Guy Aldred and the APCF left to carry on the anti-parliamentary traditions alone. He points out that while the earlier period was characterised by Intellectual ferment and high hopes of revolution, the latter period was one of Intellectual stability and dwindling expectation of revolution.

The material presented in the latter part of Shipway's book will be particularly unfamiliar to readers, and because of that especially valuable. This section of the work can be read in conjunction with the Wildcat pamphlet **Class War on the Home Front** reviewed in issue 12 of the **Bulletin**, which contains a collection of APCF reprints.

The performance of the 1924 Labour government and the activities of the Trade Unions during the 1926 General strike convinced the APCF of the validity of its left communist positions, and the group continued to publish and hold meetings throughout the inter war period. It survived the defection of Guy Aldred in 1933 to form the **United Socialist Movement**, a united front group that was, to all intents and purposes, outwith the revolutionary movement. We will deal with Guy Aldred's contribution to the British revolutionary movement in the next **Bulletin** when we plan to review a new biography of the much jelled knicker-bokered revolutionary.

Although it managed to survive, the APCF, lacked the theoretical clarity of left communist groups on the continent. On many issues it was seriously confused, confusions exacerbated by its continuing flirtation with anarchism. Some progress was made, particularly when the group made contact with **International Council Correspondence** and Paul Mattick. The APCF saw through the Labour Party policy of nationalisation:

" Government ownership, or nationalisation of industry, is not socialism. Capitalist necessity may dictate the transfer of industries to state ownership and of certain services to municipal ownership. It remains joint-stock administration just the same. Anti-socialists have nationalised railways and coal mines without benefitting the workers."

(quoted in Shipway p.120)

In the pages of its journal **Solidarity** the APCF came very close to the theory of decadence which is the backbone of our revolutionary politics today:

" During the upswing period of capitalism, when it was developing and expanding, it was possible to grant concessions to the working class ... The present period of capitalist decline is one in which

no concessions are possible for the working class ... Democracy, parliamentarianism and parliamentary organisation become obsolete and cannot be tolerated."

(Class War on the Home Front pp21-22)

With its limited theoretical understanding of the period it was inevitable that when the Spanish Civil War broke out the APCF would be swept along into a completely unprincipled support for the anti-fascist alliance of republican and left wing organisations. The APCF and USM hastily jettisoned their communist politics in a bid to become the accredited British representative of the CNT-FAI. Very late in the day some members of the APCF and USM began to reject the anti-fascist alliance; Ethel MacDonald sent back an article from Barcelona stating:

" Fascism is not something new, some new force of evil opposed to society, but is only the old enemy, Capitalism, under a new and fearful sounding name ... Under the guise of "Anti-Fascism" elements are admitted to the working class movement whose interests are still diametrically opposed to those of the workers ... Anti-Fascism is the new slogan by which the working class is being betrayed."

(quoted in Shipway p.47)

But this viewpoint does not appear to have been shared by the majority of the two organisations, who continued to support the anti-fascist crusade in Spain. The mistake had been broadly recognised by the time the Second World War broke out, but the Spanish debacle typified the tremendous inherent weakness of the British revolutionary movement in the 1930s.

The anti-parliamentary movement went into sharp decline after 1945, but individual militants continued to battle on and made contact with the new generation of revolutionary groups that emerged in the period after 1968. If today we base our politics on the contribution of the German, Dutch and Italian Left, we can still salute the courage of the men and women described in Mark Shipway's impressive new book. We owe it to them to put petty differences aside and to create the vibrant organisation needed for the decisive battles to come.

**Rowntree**



CONFERENCE ON

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INFORMATION SHEET

TIME: Saturday 1st July, 1989  
10.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m.

PLACE: Committee Room 5  
Manchester Town Hall Extension  
Albert Square, Manchester  
A map of Manchester city centre will be sent to you when  
you register.  
Booked under the title 'State Capitalism'.

FEES: Registration fee £2.50 waged  
£1.50 unwaged  
(plus £3.00 for a full set of pre-conference discussion papers)  
Please make all cheques/postal order payable to R. Knight

CRECHE: A professional creche is available

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ACCOMMODATION: Some limited accommodation is available. Advance notice is  
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Prior registration is essential. Group registration is acceptable but please  
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NAME: .....

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Box W, c/o Raven Press, 75 Piccadilly, Manchester M1 2BU.

## Communist Bulletin Group

The **Communist Bulletin Group** locates itself within the political tradition generally known as left Communism - that is the revolutionary milieu which traces its origins to the left factions which split from the decaying Third International, in particular the German, Italian and Dutch Left.

We believe that adherence to the following positions are the defining characteristics of the revolutionary communist milieu.

Capitalism, as a mode of production, has been demonstrably decadent since the outbreak of World War One and has nothing to offer now but a catastrophic cycle of crises, global war, followed by a temporary 'boom' located in post-war reconstruction.

The struggle for reforms which was an integral part of the working class' fight for its own interests in the 19th Century, the period of capitalism's ascendancy, is now a bourgeois diversion directed against the working class. The defence of working class interests today can only lead to the overthrow of capitalism, not its reform.

In this era any participation in the parliamentary circus of 'democracy' at any level whatsoever, including the use of parliamentarism as a 'revolutionary tribune', can only be an attack on the consciousness and self organisation of the proletariat.

Today trade unions everywhere, in every guise, are capitalist weapons which attack the proletarian struggle in order to defend capitalism.

There are no progressive factions of capital anymore and there can be no 'conditional support' for one faction against another. Therefore any form of 'united front' is an attack on the working class.

Likewise 'national liberation' struggles have nothing to offer the working class except a shift of alliance from one imperialist bloc to another.

There are no 'socialist' countries in the world today: Russia, China and all the other so-called 'communist' states are simply a particular form of decadent capitalism which will have to be destroyed by the proletarian revolution. All the self-proclaimed 'workers parties', the C.P.s, the Trotskyists, etc., which provide them with support, however critical or conditional, are in reality, bourgeois parties intent on imposing their own brand of state capitalism on the working class.

The working class, because it is a collective, exploited class without property of its own to defend, is the only class capable of carrying out the communist revolution. It can only do this by destroying the capitalist state and constituting a dictatorship of the proletariat based on the international power of the workers' councils.

The revolutionary party plays an indispensable role by constituting a core of political and programmatic clarity, "hard as steel, clear as glass", which allows it to undertake the 'political leadership' of the revolutionary struggles of the proletariat.

The C.B.G. believes that this 'core' of the future party is not to be found in any single revolutionary organisation currently existing. It will emerge, hand in hand with the development of the class' own struggles, from a process of fraternal confrontation and clarification involving the whole revolutionary milieu. Therefore revolutionaries today must organise themselves in a fashion which utterly rejects the suppression of this process by monolithic structure internally and by sectarian practice externally.